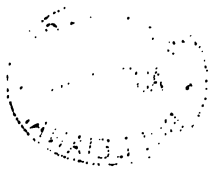

GEORGE VANBRUGH'S MISTAKE.

BY

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"TRAMPS IN THE TYROL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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GEORGE VANBRUGH'S MISTAKE.

CHAPTER I.

THE PHILOSOPHER FALLS SICK.

WINTER had passed, and the dull evenings and wet London streets were almost forgotten in the spring sunshine that peeped forth at welcome intervals. To the sisters the return of bright days meant a release from town life. It was the first winter they had passed in London, and how long and dreary it had seemed! When the lamps were lit, and the fine shops illuminated, no doubt the thoroughfares were pleasant enough, and

plays and concerts, it must be owned, possessed a greater charm than in summer time. The contrast between black night without and gilded theatre within, gorgeous in crimson hangings and resplendent in gaseliers, was great indeed, the brilliant appearance of well-filled circle and luxurious stalls being materially increased by a sense of the gloom and dirt out-of-doors. But one cannot be for ever going to the play, and, bright and pleasing as the entertainment is, it loses its charm sooner than other pastimes.

The evenings, too, were, after all, the only endurable period, the sisters averred. In the dull daytime it was miserable in the extreme to be living in a street. The clammy fog, the muddy pavement, and never-ceasing rain reduced walking to well-nigh an impossibility for all who

wore dainty boots and trim petticoats. Her black silk skirt was not fit to be seen, Kate Mallelieu maintained, after an hour's shopping in Westbourne Grove; and Lucy contended that if you walked half a mile along Oxford Street, your seal-skin jacket looked as if it had been under a mud shower-bath.

Dalebrook village was not remarkably clean, it might be admitted, but at any rate there was no necessity for carting away liquid mud all day long as they did in London. Nor was there that danger of slipping down always inherent to the black-coated pavement and greasy crossings. What would Londoners say, she would like to know, if you wore pattens in their dirty thoroughfares, and yet that was the only way of walking them respectably, Lucy stoutly avowed. There was always enough rain to keep the

streets streaming in mire, but never sufficient to wash it away. Still it was useless to ask that a little more water might be forthcoming, since ablutions of all sorts were evidently against the principles of dwellers in the metropolis. Lucy and Kate gave their town friends a good deal to think about by plainly representing these defects, of what they were constantly told was the richest city of the richest country of the world.

"If there is so much money, it is a pity you do not pay somebody to look after the place. In Dalebrook we have two road-menders, and they are always hard at work," was Lucy's argument.

"Ah, but we have people, too, to look after us. There's the Board of Works, don't you know, and the parish, and that sort of thing. They act as a check on one another," was Mr. Wright's reply.

"But they leave the snow where it falls, it seems to me, until it has melted into dirty pools that chill your feet and spoil your dresses."

"Well, I don't know about the snow. I don't think it's their business to remove that. They can't do everything, don't you know."

"Then what is the good of being rich? If the people were poorer, perhaps they would do it themselves. Our cottagers at Dalebrook have always a cleanly swept path in front of their houses."

Mr. Alpha Wright laughed, but could not deny Lucy's reasoning. "I'll tell our fellows at the club, Miss Medlicott, what you say. If they all lent a hand, we could soon sweep Pall Mall. It would be fun, wouldn't it?"

It was not from a wish to improve the London streets so much as the desire to

get away from them that caused Lucy and her sister to be so hard upon the neglect of metropolitan authorities. The apartments at Notting Hill had been taken to the end of May, but so tired was the household of London life that Mrs. Mallelieu would have given the order to march ere this had she been in a position to move. Scarcely had the long-looked-for spring weather arrived, however, than further delay became necessary. This was due to no less a cause than the illness of Master Ferdy.

The little philosopher had been ailing since their return from abroad, and the sojourn in town had not been more congenial to his tastes than to his elders. The church spires and coloured omnibuses that proved so attractive on arrival were no compensation for the loss of pony-shed and poultry-yard at Lanthradyne. There

was nowhere to play in save the narrow garret upstairs; and the necessity for continual scrubbings had caused both Wat and his brother to loathe the sight of soap and water. In the house their faces suffered from the blacks, out of doors they were splashed with mud, so that purification in one shape or another was the burden of their lives.

Once and once only did the boys secure a treat to their mind. They journeyed with auntie Loo to Clerkenwell, and played about in Job's grimy laboratory for an hour or more. But what the condition of clothes and features was at the expiration of that time Lucy could never bring herself to describe.

The philosopher was always a deep thinker, and now that his slight form lay motionless upon the bed his brain worked more actively still. Never so stout and

chubby as Wat, his figure, since the departure from Lanthradyne, had grown thinner, and his legs more spare. He did not mind a bit being kept in bed, because so many people came to talk to him; he was so tired that he should never have gone to them had he been up and dressed. Still he hoped to get well quickly, because they were all going back into the country, and Wat and he could run about the orchard once more, and climb into the pony-chaise, and play at horses.

"We shall have to go in a train to Lanthradyne, shan't we, Mr. Hollings?" was the result of a deep cogitation.

Job was holding the small thin hand. He had been sent for. The philosopher had recently questioned auntie Loo all about Job's stiff arm, and been told how the latter had been shot at in coming

to her rescue. Job might feel slighted, the sick child thought, if he did not take notice of Mr. Hollings, and nothing would appease the philosopher short of sending for the good-natured hero. How the latter was cross-questioned and examined upon every minute detail by the thoughtful invalid need not be set down. It is sufficient to say that Job Hollings at once became one of the regular nurses, and spent his spare evening hours at the little fellow's bedside.

"We shall have to go in a train to Lanthradyne, shan't we, Mr. Hollings?"

Job pressed the small hand in reply.

"Not in a luggage train?"

"Oh no," said Job.

"If we was horses and ponies we should go in luggage trains, though, shouldn't we, Mr. Hollings?"

Job pressed the hand once more.

"Wat and I shall play at trains when we get home, and you, too, if you like."

"Thank you," said Job.

The invalid lay still for some moments, and then raised himself to a sitting posture, as was his wont when there was anything important to communicate.

"Do you know that once I saw a man standing on the railway when the train was coming along, and I thought the train was going right over him. But the train went on, and there was the man still standing up beside it, because he wasn't standing on the railway at all."

"That was strange," observed Job; and the philosopher, being satisfied with Job's appreciation of the event, laid himself down again.

"I should like to be a guard with a whistle, and have a train all to myself, wouldn't you, Mr. Hollings?"

Job responded silently as before.

"Guards don't have their trains to keep, do they, Mr. Hollings?"

"Certainly not."

A pause, and then the boy began again.

"You know, my uncle George, don't you, Mr. Hollings?"

"Yes."

"I think he would buy me a whistle and let me play trains with him."

"I am sure he would."

"Because he let us whip him so much when he was a pony. I wish my uncle George was here. Can you smoke a pipe, Mr. Hollings?"

"Yes."

"So can my uncle George; I can't."

"No, but when you are a man you may."

"Yes, when I am a man I may," was

the reflection that occupied the philosopher's mind for the next few minutes.

"And when I am a man I shall be able to nurse you when you are ill, shan't I?"

"Yes."

"And I can come and talk to you?"

"Yes."

The tiny lad remained so quiet after this that Job thought he was asleep. But his eyes were still open, and as there was medicine to be given, Job rose forthwith to get it. The patient's mind grew quieter after this, and Job, like a careful nurse, took good heed not to disturb by word or deed.

"Good night, Mr. Hollings."

"Good night, sir," responded Job.

"Do you know that at first I always used to say 'Good night, all, both great and small'?" observed the philosopher, now almost overtaken by sleep; "but

now I say 'Good night, all—great, middling, and small.' "

Job acquiesced.

"That includes everybody, then. You should do it too."

Mr. Hollings promised that he would, and presently the small hand he held relaxed its power, and the child was asleep. The nurse waited still some time before moving, and then gently folded the thin arms over the sleeping form. Job would have lingered longer by the bed, but his watch was at an end, and other eager nurses were waiting to take his place.

There was the same intelligent look in sleep, and the same serious expression, now almost painful to behold in that wan face. Poor Ferdy, too, had lost his roses, and it was the lack of these that seemed to Job saddest of all. He bent over and

watched the thin nostrils as they moved fitfully, the only motion in that pallid, upturned face.

"Poor little chap!"

Then Job moved off noiselessly in a pair of old carpet slippers he used on the occasion, and opened the door. Lucy was ready to take his place, but the relief was effected outside, so that they might not disturb the sleeper.

"It is the rattle of the cabs and omnibuses that makes him talk and think so much of trains," said Lucy, when she heard Job's report. "If we could only remove him to Lanthradyne!"

"He will never blossom again in London air, miss. He might get well and be about again for a time, but he'll never get strong and sturdy till he is back in the country. It is the same with the London trees; they freshen and

green a bit in the parks and squares, but it is only for a week or two."

"I know, Job; I know. The doctor never saw him at his best, or he would say the same, I am sure. We must urge it upon him once more. Good night, Job; I shall not thank you for coming—there is no need."

"Good night, miss."

Then Job Hollings had to descend and report to Kate, and repeat over again every word he remembered of the philosopher's conversation. When he mentioned "uncle George" there was further questioning on the part of Mrs. Mallelieu.

"Did he ask for Mr. Vanbrugh?"

"No, mam, not exactly; he only said, as he has said before, 'I wish my uncle George was here.'"

"And so do I—my poor Ferdy!' Kate could not help saying.

"Shall I ask Mr. Vanbrugh to come, mam? I will tell him the message," said Job, readily. "He has not been for a long time."

Kate would have liked nothing better. But she scarcely dared. George Vanbrugh had been so strange of late. Since that morning he unceremoniously hurried off they had met but half a dozen times, and George, though affable and polite enough, had never spoken one word upon the subject of their last confidential interview. Had her husband really offended him? Ferdinand had given his word that he had not forbidden George's addresses, and this Kate could well believe, since she was quite sure nothing her husband said upon such a subject would materially influence George Vanbrugh. Her cousin had agreed to wait, and perhaps his conduct for the past three

months simply meant that he was waiting, and had no desire to prejudice Lucy's decision meanwhile. How heartily Kate wished she could believe it was so!

But if she hoped to see George in their trouble, how much more did she now desire to do so since her darling boy had asked for him? For a moment she thought of writing a brief note, imploring George to come to them; then she hesitated whether it would not be better to send a message through Job, as the latter suggested. Finally she resolved to overcome the difficulty in a still less personal manner.

"When will you be seeing Mr. Vanbrugh?" she asked.

"I will go to his rooms to-night—immediately," said the impetuous Job. "If he is not in, it won't matter, for I can wait, if it is till five in the morning."

"I should hardly like that," said Kate, absently.

"Oh, but you mustn't mind on my account. I don't begin work now till seven at Hart Street, and mother Parkle might grumble as much as she liked about my being out all night, I shouldn't care." Job spoke more like a schoolboy of five about to play his first escapade than a man of fifty.

"I did not mean that," said Kate, reddening. She had not been thinking at all of the trouble Job Hollings promised to take in the matter, but only of the annoyance his plan might entail upon George. Nobody ever did give a second thought on the subject of over-driving a willing steed.

"If I knew he was disengaged some hour in the morning I could run over from Clerkenwell, but he has always an organ

with him or some music-making implement."'

"Yes, yes; and that is why I hardly like to ask him. He might have something important to do. I was thinking, Mr. Hollings, a better plan would be if you met him and mentioned what Ferdy had said about him, he might come over at the first opportunity. Don't you think so?" added Mrs. Mallelieu, seeing that Job was scarcely satisfied.

"But if he was to know, mam, that the poor little chap upstairs had asked for him I am sure he would come at once. I had sooner take a message from you—I would indeed, mam."

Then Kate understood what she had not known before. That the same coolness, if coolness it was, that existed between her cousin and themselves, had sprung up between George and Job Hollings. How

deep that feeling was she could only conjecture, but a glance at Job's embarrassed manner convinced Kate of the fact. She would write her cousin on the subject, she said; he would get the note in the morning, and would doubtless call in as soon as he could.

Job examined the inside of that schoolboy cap of his with a woe-begone expression, and shuffled backwards towards the door. Then he looked up and said—

"I hope I have not been too free, mam; I hope I haven't given offence by presuming to say anything. I will do all you wish, mam, and gladly, if you will tell me what it is." Job screwed up his cap so tightly that the leather peak nearly came off in his hands.

"I am afraid we are very ungrateful, Mr. Hollings. We all presume upon your good-nature. We have already

given you far more trouble than we ought, asking you to come here night after night to nurse."

"Begging your pardon, mam," said Job, breaking in and putting out his hand in his energy to stop Kate; "but you must not say that. I can't let you. I mean that if you knew what pleasure it is to me to be allowed to come here you would say nothing about trouble." And then Job looked more uncomfortable still and twisted up his cap again.

"At any rate, Mr. Hollings, we must not trespass any further upon your time. Besides, if I do not write to Mr. Vanbrugh, I am sure to see him at Brompton on Sunday; only lately, of course, neither Lucy nor I have been able to get to church."

Mr. Hollings, still wringing his cap, looked only half satisfied.

Kate gaily continued in spite of herself. "Or I will ask Ferdy himself if I am to send a message to his uncle George, and then we will despatch it at once. That will do, Mr. Hollings, won't it? Thank you very much for coming. Good night, good night." Mrs. Mallelieu could bear the interview no longer, and ran upstairs to spare both herself and Job.

At the door of the sick-room she met Lucy. Lucy did not speak, but caught her sister in her arms and kissed Kate vehemently.

"What is it, Trot—not worse?"

"He is very restless, and I was just going to call you," said Lucy.

The sisters moved to the bed. Lucy bent over the little lad; the mother fell on her knees, and drew one of the thin hands to her lips.

It was so foreign to his nature to be

impatient and fretful, that the change in the child's behaviour at once made Lucy nervous. He lay quiet for some minutes, and then a sudden petulance caused him to turn restlessly from side to side.

"My poor boy!"

Kate smoothed her first-born's forehead, and the motion quieted the child's mind for a while. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"Go to sleep, dear, and you will soon be well."

Again the patient slumbered, but it was only for a minute or two; then he looked up uneasily, as before.

"We are both here, Ferdy dear, mamma and auntie Loo," said the mother, drawing still closer to her boy.

Ferdy looked at his aunt and then at Kate; then he became restless again.

"What is it, my little one?" asked the mother.

Ferdy's lips moved, but he spoke so low that neither sister could hear.

"He wants somebody, I think," whispered Lucy.

The philosopher broke down. His mouth twitched painfully, and his chest throbbed. Bursting into tears, he said, "I want my uncle George."

"You shall see him, my darling, at once; I will send for him now, Ferdy; only be a brave boy." Kate rose and hurried downstairs to stop Job.

She was but just in time. Mr. Hollings had been replacing the carpet slippers by his boots, and was in the act of concealing the former in a recess in the hall when Kate called to him.

"I am going to ask you to take a message to Mr. Vanbrugh, after all, if you do not mind. Ferdy is very ill, and asked for uncle George again; you will

take it, won't you, Mr. Hollings, for Ferdy's sake as well as mine?"

"I won't go to bed till I have seen Mr. Vanbrugh," said Job, brightening up.

Kate hastily wrote a few lines on a scrap of paper.

"Please give it into his own hands, if you can."

"I will," said Job; and before quitting the room he pulled his cap firmly over his head to show his determination.

song at the top of his voice. From his conduct he might have been taken for a man intoxicated with good fortune rather than one who had met with rebuff. He gave himself no time for thinking, but played and sang on without ceasing, till at last, fairly tired out, he rushed over to the Loungers, and astonished his friends by brilliant strokes at billiards and general high spirits.

It was in the same mood that he called next morning on his friend the Temple organist with the piece of music he had previously carried to Notting Hill. If he could get five shillings for it he would sell it, if only for the satisfaction of turning a love token into vulgar coin. He sat down and played the air in excellent style while his friend breakfasted, and George was heartily complimented both on his composition and the performance

of it. Instead of five shillings, five pounds were bidden by a likely publisher they afterwards visited, and if it had not been that George insisted upon parting with the score at once, his friend might have found a better market still.

As it was, he made George promise to try his hand at once upon other themes of a similar character, either in the shape of ballad or waltz music; and into this task George threw himself with the energy of a desperate man. If he had worked hard before, he worked harder now. What he craved was constant occupation, so that he might have no time for thinking.

He wrote a brief note to Ned Shorter —an interview would have opened up old sores—congratulating his friend on being right in his surmises, and thanking him for the counsel given to take immediate

action. With that he considered his relations with his cousins closed, and Ned was good enough to take the hint, and say no more on the subject.

Brompton New Church saw less of its organist than formerly. Vanbrugh still rigorously performed the duties, but he did little more. The post had become distasteful to him, and he endeavoured to effect an exchange with a brother in the craft, in some other part of London. He met his cousins there occasionally, but for the sake of his own peace of mind he felt this must not be. So he battled on as well as he could, avoiding a meeting whenever this was possible.

Towards Job Hollings George experienced changing sentiments. Sometimes they were bitter, sometimes only indifferent. It had long ago been clear that Lucy Medlicott had a warm esteem

for Job Hollings, and since the latter had saved Lucy's life, or, at any rate, risked his own in her service, it was not unnatural that a warmer passion should grow out of such esteem. It was very possible that neither one nor the other had any clear notion whither they were drifting. Doubtless marriage had never entered into the minds of either Lucy or her mature lover, but whether this was so or not, the position of George Vanbrugh was clear enough. If the love evinced was of the purest Platonic nature, so far as he was concerned the result was the same. George Vanbrugh could no longer hold himself at the disposal of a young lady whose affections had beyond question been bestowed upon another.

George was himself to blame a good deal in the matter. He knew how reticent Job Hollings had been; how Job shrank

from visiting at Notting Hill until informed that the ladies were annoyed at his absence. George had, indeed, compelled the man to call by saying his cousin required lavender-water and other trifles of the kind.

But stay. How was it that Job Hollings found out the address at Notting Hill? George remembered perfectly well that Hollings confessed he had been prying and following the family in London on their arrival. Was it likely Job would have done so unless his affection for Lucy was indeed strong, or unless he had received some sort of encouragement? And if Job had watched the spot once, might he not be for ever haunting it? This was the reflection that incensed George more than all, and made him resolve henceforth to hold himself aloof from the Mallelieus and their friends.

Once, and once only, had he spoken to Job Hollings. He had promised Ned Shorter to run down to Croydon with him to an evening party, and was whiling away the time as usual at the piano until the hour for starting. When he looked at his watch, so absorbed had he been that there were but a few minutes to catch the train. In a fit of annoyance he hastily closed the instrument, seized his wrapper and hat, and hurried downstairs as quickly as he could.

So rapid were his movements that a man on the opposite pavement who had been watching and waiting was caught in the act.

"What is it, my man?" cried George, roughly, as the person turned to go.

"It is me, sir; Job Hollings," said the other.

"I know it is. What is it you want, watching here?"

"I was not watching, sir. I was on my way to the Horse Guards, and was passing through."

"It's a lie! You have been here for an hour."

"Not so long, I assure you, sir. I heard you playing, and I listened."

George looked sharply at the hesitating form, and for the moment seemed inclined to be still more bitter. He curbed himself with difficulty.

"Look here, Mr. Hollings. I have no wish for your society or your presence, so I beg you won't give them me. If you don't want to irritate me, you will be as careful to keep out of my way as I am to keep out of yours. Good night."

George Vanbrugh hurried away, no better pleased for having lost his time and his temper. There was a high wind stirring, that nearly blew George's hat

into Trafalgar Square, as he ran over to Charing Cross Station, and it was in a very bad humour that he met Ned Shorter that night out of breath with running, with one hand clutching his hat and the other his overcoat.

George saw no more of Job Hollings after that. Job could scarcely expect that he, Vanbrugh, would be civil when they met, and it was better, therefore, they should be apart. He had no need to call at Notting Hill, and if Job kept out of sight, there was little to remind him of this unfortunate love affair. There was Alpha Wright, it is true, whom George met almost daily at the Loungers; but Alpha never believed in any serious attachment between the cousins. Nay, more; Alpha, after a few visits, learnt as plainly as if Lucy had told him that there was no chance of his suit being success-

ful; and although he might have guessed the lady's love was already bestowed, it was evident that George Vanbrugh was not the favoured suitor.

Alpha Wright was as frank over his dismissal as he had been of his intentions to sue for the hand of Lucy Medlicott. He made his appearance at George's rooms, as he had done before, in the yellowest of gloves and most shining of hats. This time, however, he did not wait until George ceased playing, but walked straight into the apartment, and sat himself down upon the divan, the most disconsolate of mortals. He did not even care about unbuttoning his elegant coat, but allowed it to crease as it would, and waited patiently until it should please George to attend him.

George looked for a moment at the glum figure, unable to comprehend the

sudden change. "What is it, Alpha—not the music again?" said George, turning on his stool.

Mr. Wright shook his head, but without looking up.

"Lucy Medlicott?" suggested George.

Again poor Alpha nodded; then, having twisted his cane into one of his little shoes, at the risk of injuring a silk sock of blue and red bars, he looked up, and muttered something about having been thrown over.

"I told you not to make too sure, you remember. You see, Alpha, Miss Medlicott is something of a woman of the world; she is not to be won in a day."

"Well, I know," replied Mr. Wright, testily. "But I was quite willing to go on for weeks and months, had she let me. That is just what I object to; if I could

have gone on calling and trying to win her, I would have said nothing—but she won't."

George got up from the music-stool, and patted his friend good-humouredly on the shoulder.

"I am afraid, Alpha, you had no chance of winning at all. You must console yourself with that."

"But you are her cousin, Vanbrugh; she might listen to you if you were to say something. I wish you would, old fellow; I am very hardly hit; I am, indeed." Mr. Wright wedged the cane into his shoe once more.

"It would be no use, Alpha, if I did, I assure you. I am sorry, very sorry indeed, to see you so cut up about it, but I must tell you plainly, I cannot help you. Here, shall I play that Italian thing you like so much?"

"I don't care if I never see Italy again."

"What nonsense, after promising to be my travelling companion this year. You're a pretty fellow!"

"Oh, but I thought matters would turn out differently," pleaded Mr. Wright. "I hate being a bachelor; I wonder you haven't married before now, Vanbrugh."

"Perhaps I am in the same boat as yourself. I can't get the lady to have me."

"It's a deuced unkind world, that's what I call it," cried Mr. Wright, starting to his feet, and switching his cane audibly, as he walked about the room.

"Then why on earth should we trouble ourselves about it?" was George's philosophic reply. "Sit down and have a pipe, if you are not going visiting any more to-day, and I'll play you one of

your favourite waltzes. You will be smashing that fern-case if you go on like that."

"I don't care."

"But I do. We shan't see any green leaves in the park for another month, and I can't wait so long. Get one of those pipes, and I'll sit down at the piano."

"I feel more inclined for that wretched organ of yours," said Alpha, doing as he was bid with a very wry face.

So George played while Alpha Wright smoked, and the soothing combination of music and tobacco was not long in bringing back the little gentleman's elastic spirits. After a while he brought his smart shoes and variegated socks upon the settee, and tapped with his cane to keep time with the music.

"I say, Vanbrugh, you are awfully clever, don't you know, to be able to

play like that. And you never seem out of sorts. Aren't you ever low?"

"Only when I get a fellow like you about the place."

"Or when you take to playing that organ of yours. I am such a susceptible fellow, that I could no more live with an organ on the premises than in a churchyard. Are you coming up into the billiard-room to-night?" said Mr. Wright, preparing to go.

"If you'll promise not to give way to your love-sick sentiments, I will."

"All right, I feel much better already; I do indeed." And Mr. Alpha Wright went off in a far gayer mood than he had entered George's rooms.

George Vanbrugh played billiards with his friend at the Loungers that night and many other nights in succession. He laboured hard enough by day, but Dan-

ford and Wright saw their friend at the club more frequently than of yore. A corner dining table near one of the windows, that had formerly been theirs by courtesy, was again regularly taken possession of by the three cronies, and it was rare indeed that they did not pass the evening in company. Already there was talk of another pedestrian tour among them, the only stipulation made by Vanbrugh and Wright being that the Italian lakes should be let alone this year.

"After all, there is a good deal of sameness about Lugano and Como and Maggiore," was Vanbrugh's argument.

"Yes, they are all of them so beastly blue," added Alpha Wright, viciously.

Danford looked up as if for an explanation, but there was none forthcoming. "Oh, I don't mind at all; it was you

two who were bent upon going last year, not I."

"I wanted Wright to see some of the Italian beauties," said Vanbrugh.

"Well, now I have seen them," returned Alpha, blushing. "Let us go to Norway, or any other place; I don't mind, so long as it is a good way off Como."

"By the way, Vanbrugh, have the ladies left town yet? I have intended calling for the past three months, but have never been able to get away from the office in time. When do they go?" Thus Danford.

"Upon my word I don't know," replied George. "I myself am very seldom that way; Wright has called, but not lately, I think."

"No, not very lately," added Alpha. "I say, I am off to the smoking-room; it's so awfully hot down here."

The trio adjourned to the smoking-room, where the last subject of conversation was soon forgotten. Immediately after the dinner-hour the club was tolerably full, but the numbers rapidly thinned, and it was not difficult for the party to secure one of the small billiard-rooms to themselves later in the evening.

"Vanbrugh shall give fifteen up, and play the two of us," said Alpha.

"I'll play you and give double, if you'll declare your stroke," was George's reply.

"No, let us have pool," said Danford.

"Black pool?" suggested Wright.

"Anything," acquiesced Vanbrugh; "only don't lose too much time talking."

The black ball was put up and the play commenced. The game has one marked feature, and that is, it never ceases. To Vanbrugh it mattered little so long as

he had occupation; and if the game was rapid and continuous all the better.

There was plenty of conversation about the strokes, plenty of walking about, and plenty of smoking. Possibly Vanbrugh was the best player; but as the stakes were low, the result after a couple of hours did not influence pockets to any degree. As the game proceeded, the excitement increased, and the play grew more rapid. Even Danford, the most phlegmatic of the set, became warm and flushed, and, like the others, smoked furiously, as if it was necessary to a good game to carry it on in a cloud.

"It's a quarter to one, boys," said Danford, taking the opportunity of looking at the time, as he went over to get a fresh cigar from his coat on the wall.

A click of the ball and a sweep into the pocket.

"Never mind the time; get your ball out of the pocket, Dan. I've potted you again." And then the doughty Alpha turned for a shot at his other foe.

"How much longer are you going to stay, Vanbrugh?" asked Danford, lighting up.

"Half an hour," was the reply.

"Or an hour," put in Alpha.

"I don't mind," said George.

"Only let us fix a time," the methodical Danford remarked, "otherwise we shall never leave off."

"You are leaving off now, Danford. Get on, it's your turn," cried Wright.

Black pool went on as merrily and full of excitement as before, until one of the soft-footed club waiters was found to be standing at the open door, respectfully waiting an opportunity to speak.

"Want me?" asked Danford, presently.

"No, sir; Mr. Vanbrugh, sir."

The man waited a few minutes longer, and then spoke again.

"It's you he wants, Vanbrugh," said Danford.

"All right, wait till I have played. Well, what is it?" asked George.

"A person downstairs with a message, sir—particular."

"Well, tell him to send it up."

"He won't, sir; I asked him. He wants you to come downstairs; to him, sir."

"I have no doubt he does. If he likes to bring it up, he can. I can't leave, tell him; I am very busy!"

"Yes, sir."

The waiter retired, and the game proceeded.

"I say, Vanbrugh, it may be a lady—some damsel in disguise, don't you

know!" said Alpha, looking up from a stroke.

"Never you mind, you go on with the game," said George.

"But you might go down and see. Perhaps she is too bashful to come up. By Jove, a miss; that's a prophecy, see if it isn't!"

"Serve you right for chattering," cried George.

But Alpha was right after all in respect to the bashfulness of the visitor, for when the waiter threw open the door nothing could induce the new-comer to enter. A short form in black appeared in the doorway, but it advanced no further, despite the bodily persuasions of the waiter.

"I say, Vanbrugh, why don't you ask your friend in?" said Wright, laughing.

George followed up a stroke he was

playing, and meanwhile the waiter tried, in a most comical fashion, to force the stubborn figure into the room.

"Don't, I say; don't do that, waiter, for goodness' sake," cried Wright. "Jove! he looks like the black gentleman himself come to take you away, Vanbrugh, from this wicked world! A judgment on us for playing black pool."

"Well, he'll have to come in if he wants me!" said George. Then, having finished his play, he went to the door to look more closely at the visitor.

"Hollings, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then come in, can't you?"

Wright and Vanbrugh laughed heartily at the odd-looking figure as it advanced cautiously into the room. Already ill at ease, the lights, the smoke, and the grandeur of the place made Job so nervous he could not speak intelligibly.

"Can't understand a word you say," said George, laughing, as he stood there in his shirt-sleeves, cue in one hand and glowing cigar in the other, bending down to Job.

"Well, he's a rum 'un for a messenger," roared Alpha.

Job tried to speak again, but the result of his stuttering was so ludicrous the whole party only laughed the more.

"Have you anything to give me?" suggested George.

Then Job suddenly remembered that his message had been written down, and hastily tendered a slip of paper. George became serious at once as he took it, and his change of manner gave Job courage to whisper a few words.

George threw away his cigar and rested his elbow on the mantelpiece. "It's nothing, you fellows, nothing—only——"

here George fairly broke down. "He is dead—my poor little philosopher is dead!"

"Shut up, Alpha, can't you?" whispered Danford, who was quicker to realize the matter than his friend. "Don't you see Vanbrugh has got bad news?"

"Then for goodness' sake why did they send such a rum-looking customer with it?" cried Wright, stifling his humour as well as he could.

The two friends drew on their coats and went over to Vanbrugh.

"He was only a child!" explained George, in an unsteady voice. "You know the little fellow that was at Cadenabbia last year—Kate Mallelieu's boy? He has been ill for a month, and has been asking for me, and I never knew it."

"He wanted to see you again to-night,

sir, and Mrs. Mallelieu sent to say she feared he was dying. I should have let you know sooner, but I waited half an hour at Spring Gardens." Job had recovered his self-possession now.

"My poor little philosopher! Here, waiter, a hansom—quick; get one of the boys to run into Waterloo Place and tell him to look sharp. It's a case of life and death." George could hardly trust himself to say the words.

"I have got one waiting at the door now, sir," said the messenger, quickly.

"Thank you, Job."

CHAPTER III.

LUCY'S BIBLE.

THE hansom carried George Vanbrugh and Job swiftly along to their destination. The streets were clear of traffic and well lighted, and in obedience to George's directions the cabman urged his lank quadruped on at the top of its speed. They hardly met a dozen vehicles on their way. It was too late for the theatres and too early for balls and parties. Now and then a row of carriages, tended by sleepy coachmen, lined the curb, and directed attention to some big house close by, lighted up from top

to bottom. At these points both policemen and loafers seemed to concentrate and chatter, leaving other regions void and silent beyond the hollow rattle of the solitary cab.

But the deserted thoroughfares, with their rows of lamps and dull bulwarks of shutters, rapidly as they were passed, seemed to George never ending. Sometimes he bent forward half out of the hansom in his anxiety to catch the name of a street and ascertain his whereabouts; sometimes he folded his arms and sank back into the vehicle, determined to overcome his impatience with a will. Once, and once only, he spoke to Job during the journey, when he inquired who was sitting up with the little patient.

"Both Mrs. Mallelieu and Miss Medlicott when I left, sir."

"Did you see the boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"To-night?"

"Yes, sir."

"How came you to be there?" said George, a little sharply.

"I was stopping an hour with Master Ferdy."

"Eh?"

"They have let me sit with him while he has been ill, sir."

"Every day, do you mean?"

"Yes, sir," was Job's hesitating reply.

George Vanbrugh said no more, but forced himself back into a corner of the hansom again, as if holding his tongue was a matter that necessitated much physical repression. It was Job who had to direct the cabman and stop him on their arrival, and it was not until Hollings was about to pay the fare that George became awake to the fact. Van-

brugh pressed back his companion, slipped some money into the cabman's hand, and drew Job up the steps.

There was no necessity for knocking. It was as if those inside had been listening for the arrival of a vehicle, for the door was quietly opened before George reached the portico. It was Kate. She held out her hand to grasp George's. She did not speak. Her eyes were brimming with tears, but there was a smile on her face for all that.

"I am in time?" said George.

Kate nodded, and led her cousin into the dining-room, while Job softly closed the street-door.

"I knew you would come, George; we made all sorts of excuses to him at first, but he pleaded so hard I could not refuse to send to you."

"My little philosopher!"

Then came a pause, during which Kate lit up the gasalier, for there was only one jet burning when they entered. She busied herself for a moment at the sideboard, and then asked George if he would have a glass of wine.

George was going to refuse, but corrected himself, and said he would take a glass, if Kate would have one as well.

"I don't want it, I'm sure," said Mrs. Mallelieu; "but Mr. Hollings must have something. Please to come in and take some wine before you go, Mr. Hollings."

Job could not be induced to enter until George had withdrawn, and presently the latter accompanied Mrs. Mallelieu upstairs, leaving Mr. Hollings free to act as he felt disposed.

The boy's room was at the top of the house, and thither George followed his cousin, treading the stairs as lightly as he

could. There was the same dull feeling of gloom and vacancy inside the house that he had experienced in the deserted streets.

So quietly did they ascend that neither nurse nor patient perceived them. The room was large, and one side of it followed the form of the roof, giving the place an ungainly look. But the sisters had overcome all other imperfections. A small iron bedstead, with pretty brass ornaments, was in the middle of the room, its head draped with gossamer curtains, looped with blue ribbon, that fell tent-like about the tiny couch. The head was pushed towards the sloping wall, while on the other, facing the patient, were prints innumerable, cut from the illustrated papers, which had been fixed there by Job, dove-tailed one into the other, under the philosopher's directions.

They were all pictures of country life—of farm-houses, and trees, and animals.

George gazed down at the narrow little face upon the pillow, and at the thin arms that were for ever moving restlessly over the coverlid; then he turned away to the picture-laden wall, seeking to clear his eyes from the dimness that overcame them.

Lucy touched him on the shoulder.

"I promised to wake him, George, as soon as you came; shall I do so?"

George nodded without turning round; he did not trust himself to speak.

Lucy bent down and kissed her small patient. He was half awake as it was, and his face beamed with pleasure at the welcome signal. He opened his eyes wide, and raised his head.

"Has he really come—really?"

"Yes, darling, of course he has. Here

he is, see." Lucy drew George towards the bed, where the patient could see him.

George caught the boy in his arms, and kissed and fondled him long and tenderly.

"Why, uncle George, you are crying!" said the child, unclasping his arms. "I haven't hurt you?"

"Uncle George is so glad to see you, I think that is it," said Kate.

"Yes, that is it, my boy," echoed George.

Ferdy kept firm hold of George's hand.

"And will you stay with me a long while now you have come?"

"Yes, my boy."

"You see I am so very weak now that I have to lie in bed all day long, and if nobody comes to me I never see them," was the philosopher's plaint.

George patted the sick boy's hand in reply.

"And I can't look at the fields and the trees outside. Job tells me they are getting quite green again, and that the primroses and cowslips have come; but I shall never be able to see them unless they are brought into this room, shall I?"

George coughed and blew his nose, and patted the child's hand as before.

"But you could tell me about them, uncle George, and about other things too. I want so much for somebody to tell me things, for the day is so long, you can't tell."

"Yes, yes."

"When you came to our house last summer, I remember you used to tell me how sweet the wild flowers were, how bright and golden the buttercups, and how the meadows seemed to you so fresh

and green. You said that people in London did not see such pretty things. I never thought then that I should live in London and never see them."

George pressed his small friend's hand again. "We will go off together into the country, you and I, and play about as before when you get a little stronger."

"Yes, when I am not so tired." And then the boy, still holding George's hand, dozed for some moments, his bright face showing how pleasant were the thoughts that occupied his mind.

The sisters wanted George to take this opportunity of leaving, but he had not the heart to go. If they would give him a chair or a couch he could pass the night there as well as at home; and to this Kate finally agreed. The philosopher's face beamed again when he heard that George would remain—he made the latter

give his word of honour—and the patient passed a quieter night than he had done for a long time.

Mr. Mallelieu's wardrobe afforded George a black cravat in the morning, for he had driven straight to Notting Hill arrayed in evening dress; and at breakfast Vanbrugh took the opportunity of saying a few words to Ferdinand upon the subject that had been uppermost in his mind for many weeks past. They were alone, and the matter was easily broached, for his host complained at the outset that George had not been seen at Notting Hill for an age.

"Not since you favoured me with a sight of a certain epistle, if you remember."

"Ah, of course," said Mallelieu. "By the way, did you return it, as I asked you?"

"Certainly, the very next day—after I had caused it to be photographed." George answered abruptly, for he did not like Ferdinand's way of talking.

"Had it photographed?"

"Yes."

"And for goodness' sake why?"

"Because I wanted to retain a copy of the handwriting as well as the matter."

Mallelieu was quite amused at his friend's touchiness, or possibly at the queer notion of copying the document by photography. "I should have thought you would not care to have seen the thing again—that you would be glad to forget it altogether."

George did not choose to reply, but went on eating his bacon in a surly manner.

"And that is why you never called here?"

"That is why."

Mallelieu rarely smiled or laughed; his disposition was to be cold and churlish, especially when others were enjoying themselves. By the same rule he sometimes became sarcastic and light-hearted when teasing people.

"At any rate," said George, pushing his plate away and rising from the table, "you do not seem to have regretted my absence at all."

"You mean because I was smiling just now? It was the reason you gave for your absence that amused me."

"Then you think I should have come visiting here just the same after you had explained matters to me and given me that note?" cried George, warmly.

"Yes, if you ask me," replied the other, still sitting, and elevating his brows as he looked up at George Vanbrugh.

"What was your motive, then, in showing it me?"

"Simply that you might not be coming here on a fool's errand."

George himself was hasty and spiteful enough at times, and possibly, had the subject under discussion been a less grave one, he would have retorted with some warmth. If he did not reply at once, he did not the less feel Mallelieu's sarcasm.

He stood by the mantelpiece biting his lip, while the other sat with his face half turned towards Vanbrugh. It was so plain that Mallelieu was enjoying George's discomfiture that the latter tried his best to control himself.

"I suppose, Mallelieu, that you consider yourself in some way my cousin Lucy's protector?"

"I think Lucy is quite capable of protecting herself in most circumstances."

"Not when she has adventurers to deal with. That French scoundrel ought never to have had an opportunity of stealing her money."

"Granted," said Mallelieu; "and it was your fault that he did it as much as mine. You and your clever friend Shorter knew him to be a swindler long before you took any action; you told me so."

"Well, that's past and gone," cried George, impatiently. "Whoever was at fault, it matters little now. That was only a question of money; let us take care the error is not repeated in a graver form."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Lucy seems threatened with a much greater danger now; yet you are as callous as you were before."

Mallelieu sneered undisguisedly at the angry man before him as he said,

"Perhaps you will explain further, Vanbrugh, for I can assure you I have not the slightest idea what you are talking about."

"You shall be told plainly, then. You show me a letter written by Lucy to this man Hollings. Do you mean to tell me you have spoken no word of warning to her upon the subject?"

"She is of age, isn't she?"

"And you permit this man, this underbred fellow, who is old enough to be her father, to come here day after day undisturbed, to communicate as much as he likes with Lucy, with the knowledge that their acquaintance can only have the result of promoting an attachment that any educated mind must shrink from."

"Oh, that is it, is it?"

"That is it," cried George, almost beside himself.

"Of course. As you said just now, it was stupid of me not to have understood at first. Of course, I might have known you would be jealous."

"Never mind me, Mallelieu. Pray leave me out of the question. I want to know whether this man coming here has your sanction?—whether you do not hold it your duty to say one word on the subject to your sister-in-law?"

"If Lucy is my sister-in-law, she is your cousin. From the moment I showed you that letter you were as responsible as I was."

"But you knew the delicate position in which I was placed; that if I spoke to her my words might be attributed to—to—to—another motive."

"To envy, in fact."

"If you like."

George Vanbrugh checked himself for

a few moments. He must not get into a passion, and thither the other was leading him. It was not a fair contest. To him Lucy was everything, to Mallelieu she signified simply goods and chattels, which he desired to keep by him. At the same time it was strange, indeed, in these circumstances, that Mallelieu had not sought to get rid of Hollings as he had rid himself of Vanbrugh.

An idea came to George as he conned this over and watched Mallelieu reading the newspaper, to which that gentleman had turned in a supercilious manner when the conversation flagged. It was a thought that made George's blood boil. For the moment he could hardly restrain himself from striking down the figure before him. How much he, Vanbrugh, was to blame in still remaining a bachelor, he only saw before him a man who had

robbed him of one wife and was now endeavouring to rob him of another.

"Put down that newspaper!" he cried, in a hoarse voice.

Mallelieu turned in a querulous manner; but no sooner did he see the tall form beside him livid with passion, than he jumped to his feet and instinctively passed round the corner of the breakfast-table.

"What do you mean, Vanbrugh? Are you mad?"

"I am mad, Mallelieu, so be careful how you act. Lucy Medlicott never wrote that letter you gave me."

"Did she not?" said Mallelieu. He felt safer now there was the table between them and the bell close at hand. "Do you know, I thought you would think so."

"It was written by some designing

villain, who has betrayed his trust once and is ready to betray it again!"

"Indeed!"

"Shall I name him?"

"If you can," cried Mallelieu, now as white and passionate as his opponent.

"Ferdinand Mallelieu!"

"You lie! I fling your statement back in your face. It is only a base coward, a low, disreputable fellow, who could conceive such a notion," was Mallelieu's bitter reply.

"Dare you let me appeal to Lucy herself?"

"Yes."

The men looked at each other in silence. George had his misgivings still, but his opinion was sadly shaken, not so much by Mallelieu's words as by the man's display of temper. George had cooled on the instant, and as he put his

hand to his brow his fingers trembled in a nervous manner.

Not so Mallelieu: his eyes still flashed with ire and indignation at the charge George had preferred; and there he stood, leaning over the table, waiting for the apology that George must now make.

There was no Lucy present to appeal to, but there was on the sideboard a small velvet-bound Bible of Lucy's, the gilt clasp of which attracted George's attention. He made a step towards it and took it up.

"Will you swear solemnly that what you have said is true?" said George, in shaking tones.

"With all my heart; if it was only to make you eat your words." Mallelieu snatched the Bible and kissed it. "Now what shall be the form of oath?"

"I only want," said George, in a low,

unsteady voice, "for you to assure me by all that you hold sacred that you had nothing whatever to do with the writing of that letter."

"Nothing whatever," was Mallelieu's brief and emphatic reply, as he held the little book.

"Then I must throw myself upon your generosity and ask your pardon, Mallelieu. If you forgive me, I can never forgive myself in so far forgetting my position as to use the words I did just now. You stigmatized me as a jealous man, and to my jealousy I must ascribe my wild conduct. I hope you will not refuse to shake hands?"

Mallelieu looked at George's humbled face and extended hand. Few men would have refused so abject an apology; but not Ferdinand Mallelieu. He listened unmoved to George's speech, and as soon

as the latter put forward his hand quickly drew back. He was as angry now as he had been before; with set lips he hurled the book to the furthest corner, and without a word withdrew from the room.

George Vanbrugh sat down in Mallelieu's chair, and took up the newspaper. But he could not read. Some devil had tempted him to make this terrible accusation, and he had done so. He knew something dreadful would happen if ever he ventured in that house again, and so it had turned out. He had gone from bad to worse—he was now at the end of the tether; if he desired once more to test the truth of the letter, he could not, under the circumstances, refer to Ferdinand Mallelieu's wife, the only friend in whom he trusted.

How provokingly unfortunate that his presence should have become necessary.

In his depressed mood George Vanbrugh almost began to feel harshly towards the little philosopher upstairs. But the feeling did not last long. Unperceived, a little hand had pushed open the door, and George presently felt Wat's tiny fingers plucking at his coat. The little fellow bore a spray of lilac in his hand, the sweet-scented blossom wet with a morning shower, and uncle George was bidden carry the present upstairs to poor Ferdy.

CHAPTER IV.

GEORGE VANBRUGH SPEAKS HIS MIND.

Mrs. Parkle, as we know, had more than once expressed herself on the subject of Job's amorous tendencies. In her eyes, Mr. Hollings was still a rash and impressionable lad, ready to take up with any giddy intrigue, and difficult to stay in his headstrong purpose when once he had given loose rein to his designs. In matters of the heart, indeed, Mrs. Parkle held Job to be little better than a reckless Lovelace, who required ceaseless watching, and Mrs. Parkle watched accordingly. From her chair at the back of the shop

the head of the firm followed every movement of her manager, and so long as the latter remained in view, whether engaged in book-keeping, packing, or labelling, the eyes of Mrs. Parkle rested on him.

To Job this constant supervision mattered little. He was so used to seeing the old lady's bloodshot orbits in his direction, that they never disturbed him. He went on with his work in the same methodical style, pausing at times in a leisurely fashion, and making use of the pause to return Mrs. Parkle's gaze, a step that caused the lady to resume her sewing in some haste and confusion; for there was still work to do, though, thanks to Mrs. Parkle's curious way of treating customers, the shop might long ago have been closed without loss. Demands for simples and preparations therefrom, and for "Parkle's Pure Lavender-Water,"

still came in occasionally from dealers and wholesale houses; but business was decidedly on the decline. Druggists and herbalists drew their supplies from cultivated plantations, and no longer depended on collections made by the wayside, in gravel-pit, copse, or moor.

But had business been ten times as great as it was it would not have interested Mrs. Parkle so much as the mystery about Job's love affairs. It was no use his denying the impeachment since the visit of Lucy and the two boys to Hart Street at Christmas. Lucy had chatted with Mrs. Parkle while Job took the boys to see his laboratory, to look at the queer apparatus and sniff at the row of dirty bottles—that memorable day, when the little lads enjoyed their only romp since quitting Lanthradyne. While the philosopher and Master Wat were

exploring the grimy regions at the back of Hart Street, to the detriment of clean frocks and pelisses, Lucy was endeavouring to secure Mrs. Parkle's good will by gossiping amiably about Job Hollings and the services he had rendered at Dalebrook. Lucy little recked how harshly her words fell upon the dame's ear, and how every smile and good-natured compliment was regarded as only one proof the more of the visitor's attachment to Job Hollings. Mrs. Parkle maintained her austerity to the last, and, when the lady and her charges had departed, openly derided nervous Mr. Hollings upon the awkwardness he displayed in the presence of his chosen one.

After that visit, Mrs. Parkle refused to listen to any explanation from Job. She uttered her oft-repeated threat to turn out of doors any saucy baggage that

Job might presume to bring home with him as his wife, no matter what airs the minx gave herself. She was still his mistress, as Job would discover if he played up any of his pranks.

Job, on his part, had long ceased to allow any word or threat of Mrs. Parkle to weigh in his mind. But although amused at first at the allusions to Miss Medlicott, he had latterly grown rather tired of their constant repetition. To put an end to them he adopted the expedient, therefore, of withdrawing himself to the laboratory whenever Mrs. Parkle's tongue waxed sharp, and hence it was the head of the firm had latterly contented herself with staring her protests instead of speaking them.

"Halloa! why, Crawford's people say they have sent up twice with those bottles, but there was nobody to pay

for them." Job, in his apron and shirt-sleeves, was looking over correspondence, and turned sharply to Mrs. Parkle for an explanation. "Eh, is that true?" he said, pulling off his round-rimmed glasses.

"I dare say it is, as they say so."

"Then why didn't you tell me? Here have I been waiting for those very bottles to complete an order, and you won't take them in."

"They might leave them without the money; they used to do so."

"And you used to pay their bill without any fuss. They are quite right not to deliver without the cash. I know I wouldn't."

Job contented himself with energetically inditing a further epistle to Messrs. Crawford and Co., but what its purport was he did not condescend to explain. He glanced wrathfully at his mistress as he

put the letter on one side, and asked if any one else had called.

"You should remain at home and see for yourself," was Mrs. Parkle's acid reply.

Mr. Hollings took this for a negative, resumed his spectacles, and went on laboriously with his writing. But his mistress had no intention of letting him off so easily.

"Yes; there was somebody else who called," she said, nodding her head with importance.

Job waited until he had reached the end of a sentence before he laid down the pen. Then he faced round on his stool, and hitched up his trousers, to intimate that he meant to have it out now before proceeding further.

"Who was it?" he asked, sharply.

"Who was it that called?" she repeated.

"Yes; who was it that called? You understand me perfectly well."

"Well, I don't know his name; but he was one of your new friends. He asked where you were, and I told him I didn't know."

"Mr. Vanbrugh—a tall gentleman with a fair beard?" suggested Job.

"I don't know his name, I tell you, and don't want to. I said you were gone to Notting Hill, courting that young woman of yours, and I didn't care if you never came back again."

"You said that?" cried Job, fast getting into a passion.

"Aye, I said that, and more besides," said Mrs. Parkle, mischievously.

"You miserable woman, what have you done? Do you know that he is, I mean, that——"

Job did not finish the sentence, but

got down from the stool and walked about the dark shop in sheer vexation.

"I have spoilt your fun, my lad, have I? The other gentleman is a rival, is he, Job? Well, do you know I suspected as much, and that is why I mentioned the circumstance to him!"

Mrs. Parkle's little eyes glared spitefully. She had not for a long time past achieved such a victory over Job, and was in no mind to spare her victim. She had hoped for something of the sort when she spoke to George Vanbrugh, but she never anticipated that her plan would succeed so thoroughly.

As for Job, he grew calmer as soon as he saw Mrs. Parkle enjoying herself at his expense. He climbed upon his stool again, closed the ledger, shut up his correspondence in one of the drawers, and put on his coat. Then, filling his

pipe, he lit it, and went off through the yard to his laboratory.

There was the huge stock jar on the table, as it had been for days past, awaiting the arrival of those bottles which never came. The sight of it reminded Job once more of Mrs. Parkle, and bade fair to rouse him again from his philosophic mood. But he had long ago gained mastership over his temper, and now was divided upon the subject of having a turn at the pestle and mortar or taking his ease in the broken Windsor chair in the corner. His perturbed self favoured the former, while the latter course suggested itself as that necessitating more moral courage; hence it was chosen.

The cushion was methodically taken from the table drawer, and presently Job Hollings was in his favourite position,

tilted back in his resting-place, and smoking away vigorously.

But his pipe did not produce the soothing effect he anticipated. He would have done better to have tried the pestle and mortar. His restlessness only increased the more he sat and fumed, and before he had consumed a second pipe he could retain his seat no longer. He jumped to his feet, and, with a hasty movement, beat the ashes out of his pipe.

"It's better done at once, I'm sure of it. I am glad now the old she-cat did tell Mr. Vanbrugh. It will give me an opportunity of saying what I have wanted to say all along. I'll go this very instant, before I get afraid again."

Job Hollings had not much courage as it was, to judge by the nervous way he bustled about. His laboratory was his usual dressing-room, and behind the door

was nailed the fragment of a looking-glass that served him for mirror. He dusted his black garments as well as he could with an antiquated clothes-brush, carefully preserved in the table drawer, and further applied this implement to the cloth cap with the large peak. But it was Job's boots that were the great solicitude. They might be thin and worn, but so far as polish was concerned left nothing to be desired; and when, moreover, a narrow fissure at one of the sides had been properly covered with blacking, or rather the stocking that peeped through it, Job himself felt that any further adornment was impossible.

However quickly he might be disposed to execute his commission, no feeling of haste interfered with due attention to his toilet. If anything, he was occupied rather longer than was his custom, but

this might have been nervousness. He locked the drawer, put the key in his pocket, and walked determinedly out through the shop without deigning to notice his mistress.

Job did not smoke. His business was of too serious a nature. He turned into Exmouth Street, and made his way by Coldbath Fields into Holborn, walking, or rather ambling, sometimes in the roadway and sometimes on the pavement, just as obstructions determined.

George Vanbrugh was working away at an air on the piano, a serenade Shorter had sent him to be fitted with music, when Job's hesitating knock came to the door.

"It's Alpha Wright in low water again," thought George, as he called out "Come in!" in a stentorian voice.

A pause, and then, as the door was

opened timidly, George, still seated on the music-stool, stretched out his hand for a volume off the table and hurled it with some force against the panel. The aim was effective, for the door quivered perceptibly, and somebody suddenly said "Oh!"

"By Jove! it isn't Wright after all," cried Vanbrugh, jumping up, but unable to restrain his merriment. "I say, I beg your pardon. I hope you are not hurt."

George ceased to laugh as soon as he saw who his visitor was. He hoped Job wasn't injured at all, he said, and then went back to his piano, leaving Mr. Hollings standing just inside the room with his cap in his hand.

"Mr. Vanbrugh, sir, do listen to me for a moment," was Job's awkward appeal.

"All right, Mr. Hollings; go on. I'm

listening." George did not turn round, but arranged the music sheets before him.

"You have been angry with me a long time, sir, and I think I know the reason."

"That is very probable."

It was a difficult matter for Job Hollings to proceed under these circumstances. He brought forth a large cotton handkerchief of yellow with white spots, and blew his nose spasmodically two or three times, but it only had the effect of bringing more moisture to his eyes. He looked up appealingly to George, but the latter's broad back was before him.

"You used to be very good to me once, Mr. Vanbrugh," urged Job, as well as he could; "and now I want you to be kind to me once more."

If Job thought that George would help him out he was deceived. Vanbrugh

still sat with his back to the visitor, although his fingers had ceased to fidget with the music sheets.

Another application of the big yellow handkerchief and Job's unsteady voice was again heard. He saw, from Vanbrugh's still form, how intently the latter was listening, and this was some encouragement.

"The time was, sir, when you allowed me to take the liberty——"

"That time is past!" cried George decisively, bringing down his hand with some force, though still not looking at his visitor.

"It is, unfortunately for me," said Job, stretching out his arm in an imploring manner. "Heaven knows, sir, if I could get back your good opinion, it would be the greatest happiness that could befall me."

A few moments passed in silence, and then Job timidly asked if he might speak of an incident that occurred at their first time of meeting. George made no objection, and his visitor proceeded with diffidence.

"You remember my pointing out Lanthradyne from the top of that ridge, sir?"

"Yes, perfectly well."

"I said something then, sir, that displeased you about Miss—Miss——"

"Yes, I know; you were good enough to bestow your paternal blessing, Mr. Hollings, and all that sort of thing. That is the incident you refer to, I have no doubt. Well?" added George, suddenly swinging round on the music-stool.

Job nodded and reddened, but George's rapid movement prevented him from speaking.

"That is the incident, is it not? You see I remember it perfectly well; and I will tell you why. I thought at the time it was made by an honest, blundering fellow. I was taken in; I admit it frankly—taken in, too, in the face of the evidence of my own senses. You permitted me plainly to see the light in which you regarded Miss Medlicott; you acquainted me with your sentiments again and again when I nursed you at Lanthradyne; and yet, with my eyes thus opened, I was fool enough to persevere in a passion to which there could obviously be no response. I have nothing to say to you, Mr. Hollings; you may go from here as soon as you please, and the sooner the better, for you can scarcely think I have any predilection for your presence. So long as you are out of sight I am content; but you really must

understand that a man cannot possibly have much affection for a successful rival. To put it more plainly, I hate you!" George Vanbrugh spoke quickly and vindictively; and, to add further emphasis, he faced the piano again as he uttered the last words.

Job Hollings remained silent and motionless, looking at the broad back before him. He would have thrown himself on his knees before George Vanbrugh and begged for a hearing, had he the energy to do so. But he could not even speak, so terribly shaken was he by the other's upbraiding. He leaned forward, one hand resting upon the table, the other stretched towards his whilom friend. Presently he said,—

"I will go this moment, Mr. Vanbrugh, if you order me; but I beseech you to let me speak first."

"In the devil's name, speak, then, and begone!" cried the other, impatiently.

"Mr. Vanbrugh, how can you think for a moment that I could possibly hope to gain Miss Medlicott's affection?"

"Tut, tut, that was your argument before, Hollings; you *have* gained it, and you know that as well as I do."

"But, Mr. Vanbrugh, hear me. Do not make sport of me. How is it possible that a humble fellow like myself can stand between a gentleman and a lady? A man of low origin, advanced in years, with no education, the laughing-stock as I was of your club the other night, how can you, even in jest, refer to me as a suitor for Miss Medlicott's hand?"

"Eh?" cried George, turning sharply on the stool once more. "A suitor for Miss Medlicott, Mr. Hollings? No, I never called you that."

Vanbrugh's loud ironical laugh dumbfounded Job a second time: he did not reply, simply because he was unable to.

"Once for all, Hollings, please understand. I did not for one instant suppose such a thing as marriage between Miss Medlicott and yourself—even my wildest notion never led me so far. I am only concerned in this, that I was unable to gain Miss Medlicott's affection because somebody else was in the way, and that somebody is yourself. Again I say I do not complain. I am content so long as you keep out of my sight. Now pray be off."

Vanbrugh rearranged his music before him, as a hint that he wished to be alone. Hollings had recourse again to the limp yellow handkerchief, and its application seemed to give him confidence, for after a while he put it away determinedly, and,

fetching a deep breath, said, "I—must—speak—to—you—once—more—sir."

"It will be the last time, then," cried George, rising wrathfully, and standing bolt upright as he faced the shabby figure in black.

"It shall be the last time, Mr. Vanbrugh. I am no longer afraid, as I was just now. I have decided what to do, and my resolution has given me courage. I am getting to be an old man now, and shall soon be a matter of little consequence to anybody. You shall never see me again, Mr. Vanbrugh, either here or at Mrs. Mallelieu's, or anywhere. I will take good care of that, sir,—I will indeed. But if you only knew what a dull, dreary life I have passed, and how eagerly I have looked forward to the rare intervals of brightness when I should see that gentle, kindly face I worshipped, so

different from all those in the close London streets, you yourself, much as you despise me, would feel some sort of pity, or at any rate excuse, for my conduct. I do not attempt to justify myself. I have erred not only against you, but against the being of all others I wanted to serve. I shall atone for my fault by my punishment. If you cannot forgive me, Mr. Vanbrugh, I cannot forgive myself. How I could have been so blind, so selfish, so mistaken, I do not know. I saw how you avoided me, and how uneasy the ladies and Mr. Mallelieu have been of late; but, fool and dotard that I was, I never thought of the cause. Believe me, Mr. Vanbrugh, you shall never have reason to complain again. If I can show my esteem in no other way, I can at least do so by my absence. You shall have no cause to hate me in future."

George listened in silence. There were pauses in the rough speech, but the speaker maintained his firmness of voice to the last.

The men looked fixedly at each other; the taller one, with his mouth set fast, as he had remained the whole time, doggedly determined not to say another word; the other, now he had performed his task, waiting with quivering lips for some mark of approval or dissatisfaction. He waited in vain. George Vanbrugh merely raised his eyes and shrugged his shoulders.

Then Job turned slowly away towards the door, with bowed head and shuffling gait, and as it closed upon him there came forth a deep, heart-rending sob—a sob so terrible that it brought George Vanbrugh to his senses.

"Heaven forgive me if what he says is true."

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER CLIENT OF MR. SHORTER.

GEORGE VANBRUGH remained standing for some minutes after Job Hollings made his exit. His ire had been roused in no ordinary degree by the mention of his cousin's name in connection with Job, and the latter's speech, humbly as it was made, failed to appease the angry and unsuccessful lover.

Though the object of his indignation was no longer present he still uttered imprecations and invectives against the man who had presumed to pester him with confidences and to discuss matters

which a comrade of Vanbrugh's own standing would scarcely have dared to broach.

"To knock at the door and come in, as if he were one of my own friends, and to stand there talking to me after I had told him to go away a dozen times! Confound the fellow's impudence!"

Vanbrugh laughed, a loud, unpleasant laugh, and sat down restlessly at the piano. But he soon got up again, and resumed his old position facing the door. He still muttered ill-natured things about Job, but they were not so spiteful as they had been.

George Vanbrugh began to grow a bit ashamed of himself. A man who does as he pleases and has what he wants is usually good-tempered enough, and bears, as a rule, the character of being amiable. George had for years sustained the good

opinion of his friends, and hence when he was angered knew intuitively it could only be a just cause that ruffled him. According to the testimony of all who knew him, he was such an easy-going, even-tempered man, that the occasion must indeed be grave to excite his ire. This fact he never doubted, so that when Job Hollings roused his indignation he felt that he was righteously roused.

We must admit, too, some shadow of excuse for George's excitability. A year ago he made up his mind to forswear bachelor habits and marry; from that moment he had met with nought but disappointment. His pleasant life had been suddenly and rudely checked, and in place of the enjoyments and comforts previously known there had been nothing but trouble and vexation. Even the resolutions he formed and carried out

were fruitless in their results, and the gravest woe of all he was not permitted to forget, through the clumsy intervention of the individual who stood in the way of his happiness.

He would be a strong man to bear such disappointments with equanimity, and George Vanbrugh was not a strong man. The life he had led since he came of age was not calculated to steel a man against troubles, and George made little headway against them. Still the past twelve-month had taught him much, if it had only shown he was not the invincible Adonis he took himself to be.

But what were his troubles compared with those of Job Hollings? George uttered no more imprecations when he thought of that. Now the man was gone George began to have misgivings about the part he had played. It had

been his idea all along that he had acted rather firmly and dispassionately than otherwise; but his better self now asked him to consider matters from Job Hollings's point of view.

"Good Heavens, if what he says is true!"

And yet if Job had returned that moment his presence would certainly have brought down George Vanbrugh's wrath tenfold heavier than before. A high-spirited man foiled and rejected has little control over his temper.

The serenade did not progress much under these circumstances. Vanbrugh had already worked out the beginning of a theme and grown quite interested in the motive when he was interrupted, but now all attempts to recall the air were unavailing.

"It's no use; besides, who ever heard

of putting music to such wretched stuff as this? Shorter ought to be ashamed of himself for writing it:—

"'From her feet to her face she combines every grace
That blossom or berry can show;
She is fairest and rarest of all flowerhood,
And blossoms when they cease to blow.'

It reminds one of costermongers and corduroys. 'All a-blowing and a-growing.' That's where Shorter got the notion from, I'll be bound. What a pity he didn't rhyme 'blow' with 'clo'.' I'll tell him. At any rate, I am not going to spend any more time over his old-clothesman poetry!"

George threw the sheet of paper on the table and closed the piano in a pet. He was angry before; now he was put out because he had been angry. Like many of us who are not brave enough to bear

our own evils, he cast about for some one else to blame, and he was not long searching.

"If I am wrong in my estimate of Hollings, I got it from Shorter; he first put it into my head. He always disliked Hollings, and was not satisfied until he made me dislike him too."

George Vanbrugh pulled out his watch and looked at the time. It was nearly four o'clock. If he made haste he might catch Shorter before the latter left the Old Bailey. He need not in that case wait for the morrow, and besides he could get a longer chat than was possible during the barrister's hurried breakfast. Vanbrugh put on his hat and went off, carrying the despised serenade with him. It would be useful in beginning an attack upon Shorter.

George was in plenty of time. When

he entered the square, close-smelling court, there was Mr. Edward Shorter standing, with his hands on his hips, blandly smiling in the direction of the judge. The plausible young barrister as a rule employed but two modes of address —one of righteous indignation, when his feelings overcame him to such an extent that he could hardly bring himself to defend the prisoner at all; and the other of open astonishment and good-humoured surprise at the utter absurdity of bringing the charge. He chose one course or the other as his sense dictated after a study of the prisoner and the jury. For the moment he had stayed his indignation, and was speaking with a frankness and candour that was the more taking because of the advocate's light humour. It was a case to which no gravity could possibly be attached on account of the

ludicrous position of his client being there at the bar at all.

The judge was closely searching his notes, and Mr. Shorter blandly waiting the pleasure of the bench to proceed, when George's glum face came into court. His lordship rather doubted one of Mr. Shorter's assertions, it appeared, and that gentleman, in excellent spirits, was quietly biding the time when he should be pronounced in the right. As it turned out, Mr. Shorter was found to be in the wrong; but this had no effect upon his good humour—on the contrary, he thanked his lordship for the correction, and nodded gaily at George to indicate what little importance the point in question had upon the bearing of the case. The prisoner was a policeman, charged with having been in collusion with a gang of thieves, and the question was whether

n his report to his superior the man had suppressed any material details. It was alleged that one important fact, at any rate, had been so omitted, but this Mr. Shorter would not admit, and, by way of refutation, read the entry made by the prisoner.

It was this entry his lordship could not find in his notes, and so he told Mr. Shorter.

"It is a matter after all, my l'd, to which I do not attach much weight. But trivial as it seems, I can assure you the facts are very clearly set forth in the document in my hand, which I shall be happy to pass to your l'dship immediately."

Mr. Shorter was proceeding with his speech, when the counsel for the prosecution pointed out that the document his lordship referred to was the original

report made by the police officer, while that in Mr. Shorter's hand was an amended report, made by the prisoner after he was aware that his conduct had excited suspicion.

Mr. Shorter listened complacently. He was obliged to his learned friend for interposing the explanation. That would at once make matters clear to his lordship. It was the fuller and more perfect report he was reading from.

"But that makes all the difference. A constable writes a report that contains no mention of certain circumstances. He is told it is unsatisfactory, and is ordered to go back and write another, and then we get this second document," was the judge's remark.

"Precisely. But your l'dship, I am sure, would be the last to construe guilt from such an action. My client, clever,

painstaking police officer though he be, does not profess to be a writer of despatches or a novelist. If Scotland Yard desires competent story-tellers on their staff, there are plenty of literary men to be found; but if they wish policemen of courage and integrity, I am bound to say that in my client they have got what they want. No one will more readily admit than I do the imperfections from a story-teller's point of view of my client's original report; it is bald, uninteresting, incomplete. But it is honest, it is straightforward, it is true. What more can I say? If my learned friend had ventured to impugn its veracity on any point, I should have been ready to take up the cudgels. He has not done so, and left me consequently a very easy task to perform. My client is asked if he cannot spin out his report to greater length,

and he does so by adding words to it. However else he could have made a fuller report than by adding words I am at a loss to know. Now there seems to be an insinuation—my learned friend was too wise to make any direct charge—as to the accuracy of this complete report, which my client, be it remembered, did not make of his own free will, gentlemen, but at the special request of his superiors. For my part I hardly think such a thing deserves to be treated seriously, and I shall certainly not do so. In fact, you must agree with me, gentlemen, that I have already taken up too much time upon so trivial a point in the case."

Mr. Shorter then proceeded in the same light-hearted strain to touch other points of weakness in his client's case, and if his speech had come on earlier in the day the result to the prisoner might have been

different. But the judge grew touchy towards the end of the little barrister's oration, and summed up with considerable acidity, the upshot of the affair being a verdict of guilty and a sentence of twelve months' hard labour.

George was as interested as the rest in the fortunes of the prisoner, but had not altogether forgotten his ill-will towards his former partner; so that he was rather glad than otherwise at an opportunity of twitting Shorter as the latter was bending down cramming his documents into a red bag.

"Eh, do you hear that, Ned—a twelve-month and hard labour?"

"Serve him jolly well right; he deserves every day of it. I'd have given him double if I had had the sentencing of him. It will teach them to mark the brief better next time. Come on out of

this, unless you want me to die of gaol fever."

The big bag was made over to Mr. Whiffler's successor, and Shorter took George's arm down the passage. There was the same slinking crowd of unshaven men and draggle-tailed women, and the same eagerness to get a view of Mr. Shorter and his brethren as they passed to their cabs.

"I say, George, don't pray look so glum and envious; we can't all be celebrities, and I allowed you to walk with me, remember, in full sight of them all," said Mr. Shorter, as they sat in their four-wheeler preparing to start.

"Gaol-birds, the whole of them, who have lost their liberty so long that they return to flutter round their prison walls," returned George, looking out at the men and women, who continued to gaze steadily at Mr. Shorter.

"Very prettily expressed, George—quite a charming picture; but I wish Jueh would drive on. I'm an admirer of contrast myself, and the picture of fluttering doves palls upon a fellow after a while."

They drove to the Middle Temple, for Shorter was off to dine with some brethren of his circuit, and wanted to dress at his chambers.

"You can tell me the news, George, while I array myself. What is it? liver out of order—you look like it?"

Vanburgh did not care about airing his grievances in a shaky cab, so he waited accordingly. There was a brief altercation with cabby on quitting the vehicle; the man held out Shorter's coin in the palm of his hand, and wished to know whether he, Shorter, called it a shilling, and the barrister had perforce

to go back to bear testimony to the fact, a confirmation, nevertheless, that failed to make cabby any happier. They went upstairs, and the energetic Mr. Shorter forthwith made his preparations with all speed. In less than two minutes he had well-nigh stripped himself.

"That man, Hollings, you know," George commenced, "he came to my place to-day and cut up rough. Said he meant to be off, and not to worry me or Lucy any more."

"Well, that's just what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes, only I didn't mean to be hard upon the poor devil. I think he is rather to be pitied."

"So do I. Chuck us over a clean towel, George, out of that press."

Vanbrugh did as he was desired, but heartily wished his friend would pay a

little more attention. "Look here, Ned, I don't bother you often."

"You don't, my dear fellow; I wish you would. Will you come along to-night and dine with us?"

"No, I won't. Will you listen to me?"

"Certainly I will, if you won't mind looking after one of my studs for me. I dropped it just down here—no, it's all right; I put it in my shirt and didn't know it. Now then, fire away, George; I'm all attention." Shorter was quiet for the moment, for he was tying his white cravat.

"Well, I was saying about Hollings. He is a decent sort of a fellow after all, and a man whose feelings I don't like to hurt. His only pleasure in life seemed to be to please Lucy; and now he vows he will go away and keep out of sight for

ever. I feel a good deal for the chap, for I think he means what he says; and after what he has done for us—or rather me—I am of course beholden to him."

"Of course you are."

"I have no special dislike to the man, and I'm afraid lest he should be doing something rash after I kicked him out of my place to-day."

"Very likely."

"Well, then, you might get one of your fellows to keep an eye on him, and hint that I wasn't so angry as I seemed, and if I can do anything, you know, I'll do it."

"All right, I will."

"What do you think about this man going away?" said George.

"Oh, I think he is quite right," replied Mr. Shorter.

"Yet you were the very one who coun-

selled me against Hollings, and suggested my throwing him over."

"Obviously, then, my advice was bad."

"You said he wasn't to be trusted."

"Yes; but how do you know I'm not a liar?"

"That's just like you, Shorter. Whenever your opinion turns out wrong, you repudiate it."

"Of course I do."

"In any case you have led me into a pretty mess," said Vanbrugh, getting angry.

"Oh, George, George! You know, my dear fellow, you would never have followed my advice or anybody else's unless it tallied precisely with your own ideas. I advised you to go straight off to Lucy Medlicott, and ask her plainly to marry you, or give her reasons for not doing so. Did you?"

"No; but I have seen Kate, and I have seen Ferdinand Mallelieu; and a nice scrape I have got into with one and the other."

"Well, I'm very sorry for you," returned Shorter, scarcely able to repress his laughter.

"It seems to me I have been making a fool of myself all round."

Mr. Shorter shrugged his shoulders.

"And the last thing is that I make a poor devil unhappy for the rest of his life."

"Look here, George, it strikes me very forcibly that your period of dotage is rapidly approaching. I don't mind a bit listening to your plaints when I'm dressing, but I am not going to give you the least encouragement by waiting here longer than I need. Where's the music to that serenade of mine?"

"Where the words ought to be—buried in oblivion, or I should say, rather, unborn."

"You are a pretty fellow! and I imagined all the while that you had turned up here on purpose to give it me."

George smiled in spite of himself.

"All right, Ned, I'll have another shy at it, only this confounded business has put everything out of my head. Now, what had I better do?" It was high time George asked the question, for Mr. Shorter was making towards the door preparatory to going downstairs.

"Do? you great coward, why, what I said six months ago. I told you then to go to Lucy Medlicott and beg her to give you her reasons for not marrying. Instead of that, if you are not fool enough to go to your biggest enemy—to the man whose interest it is of all

others that you should not marry—and listen to him. I never heard of anything so ludicrous, so excruciatingly funny—never, upon my word. And what is more, you are quite ready to accept any nonsense that Mallelieu chooses to tell you as 'gospel.'"

"But I taxed him with writing the letter; I did, indeed, Ned," urged George.

"Taxed him with writing the letter—bosh! You are a muff to have anything to say to him. Why, what satisfaction could you possibly get out of such a man as Mallelieu? However, I am not going to argue; I have said all I mean to say, and now I'm off."

Mr. Shorter put on his opera hat, and, going up to the mirror, surveyed his closely-cropped whiskers through an eye-glass with satisfaction.

"Well," he cried, turning sharply round, "do you mean to do as I tell you?"

"Yes, I think so, Ned."

"If you don't, I tell you plainly I shall go to Miss Medlicott herself—I will, indeed. I can't have you coming here time after time, grumbling in this fashion. You never did it when we were partners; upon my soul I believe it's envy. Where are my gloves? Come along!"

CHAPTER VI.

LUCY'S PROTECTORS EXPLAIN THEIR MODE OF PROTECTION.

THE philosopher progressed steadily, if slowly, towards convalescence; so favourable, indeed, was his condition that already arrangements had been made by Kate Mallelieu to move into the country. Lucy was despatched to Lanthradyne to make all ready for the coming home, and to take special precautions for the reception of the invalid, a duty that kept her away from his couch for three whole days. Ferdy would have taken little notice of this absence of his aunt's if it

had not been that his friend Job also ceased attendance at the same time. Kate took heed not to ask cousin George after the missing one, for she understood well enough by the way each of them timed his visit that they were no longer the best of friends. But the philosopher had no such scruples.

"I say, uncle George."

"Halloa, my friend!"

"You know auntie Loo has gone home to get our house ready for me."

"Oh, yes; I know that."

"Has Job gone with her?"

"No, I should think not," returned George, laughing.

"Because he did take care of her once before, you know," urged the sober philosopher, despite George's merriment.

It was wisest, George thought, to change the subject of conversation, so he

endeavoured to lead his friend to talk about the pony and the cows—Beauty and Blossom—which had been so long neglected.

"Why, they won't know you again, Ferdy; you and Wat have grown so tall they will never recognize their masters. And the fields and the flowers, won't it be nice to walk knee-deep in the red clover and the big star daisies again?"

"Yes; for I have learnt all about flowers now. Do you know Job taught me? If you will bring me that big book in the corner I will tell you about them too."

It was a huge volume, in which flowers had been pressed and dried with unusual care, and arranged according to their classes. So skilfully were they preserved that in many cases the colours were as fresh and vivid as when the blossoms

were first plucked. The towering foxglove in purple and green, the wild hyacinth, the pale-faced wood anemone, the blue-eyed forget-me-not, the cornflower in black and azure, the blood-red poppy, all the familiar Kentish flowers, were, to Ferdy's delight, contained in the big book.

"If you'll hold it so, uncle George, and name a flower I will find it for you in a minute. When I am well again Job is going to show me where all their homes are, and where they like to grow best."

It was obviously a difficult matter to turn the philosopher's attention from Job Hollings, so George did not pursue the attempt further. He had small liking for botany, but this did not prevent him taking an interest in Ferdy's wonderful flower book; so George listened atten-

tively as the other exhibited the specimens one after the other, and discoursed upon their various qualities—how this would make you go to sleep, that one to grow well, and a third kill you dead if you swallowed it.

It was plain Job Hollings meant to keep his word, and henceforth remain out of sight. From Ferdy, George learnt that Job had not been seen since the latter's visit to Spring Gardens, and from Shorter had come a brief message intimating that the man was no longer to be found in Hart Street, but was evidently gone on one of his rounds. All sorts of misgivings began to occupy George Vanbrugh's mind, and he would have given much to recall that last interview. With Kate he dared not discuss the subject, after that stormy interview with her husband, even if she had invite

such discussion; but she kept aloof, and they only met in the sick-room, or downstairs in the presence of Ferdinand Mallelieu.

But Lucy returned, and George felt that matters must now come to a crisis. When she left, everything seemed to have taken a turn for the better; the patient was prospering, George had come back to them, and Job Hollings was in a happier mood than since he first came to nurse the patient. With her absence everything had got out of joint again, and the only happy face to welcome her back was that of the convalescent philosopher.

Lucy listened to her sister's anxious forebodings. It was clear they had won back George at the expense of Job Hollings, but Kate hesitated to speak to George on the subject. Ferdinand had

quarrelled for some reason with George Vanbrugh, and altogether affairs at Notting Hill had come to a pretty pass.

"I shall be so glad, Trot, when we have left London behind us," bewailed poor Kate.

Lucy kissed her sister. She was sick at heart. She had come back from the fresh air and green hills, her spirits buoyant and her mind filled with hopeful anticipations, to find distress and rancour still lurking at home. But she was a woman of ready resource, and was not long in forming a resolution. She decided upon seeing George at the first opportunity, and appealing to his generosity for an explanation. So that George Vanbrugh, when he called in the afternoon, was informed that Miss Medlicott desired to see him in the drawing-room.

"I think you will guess why I asked

you to come?" said Lucy, when they had shaken hands.

George divined the reason, but he hardly thought Lucy would have gone so directly to the point.

"It is about Mr. Hollings, for one thing, George," pursued Lucy, as her cousin looked down at her without speaking.

"Yes." George came over hot and cold. Was it about Job's absence only, or about the letter Ferdinand gave him?

"You have been so long away from us, George, that it gets very difficult to speak again as cousins; but I know we may trust you always, and that you will be straightforward with us."

George, still standing, made an impatient gesture with his hand.

Lucy, without venturing to look in his direction, continued, in a nervous way,

"I have no right to ask you why you kept away. To Kate, as well as to me, it has been a hard trial, but we have all our burdens to bear. We know you acted for the best, and that is enough for us. But you will tell us why Mr. Hollings so suddenly went away when you came, won't you?—that is, if you know."

George considered for a moment, and then said, quietly, "Cannot you tell why?"

Lucy looked up quickly, and, for the first time, their eyes met. "No; if I could guess the reason I should not ask you."

"Frankly, then, you cannot guess?"

"No."

"It is because we have quarrelled," was George's brief answer.

Lucy looked straight before her. She did not like, or did not dare, to carry the

questioning any further. "Thank you, George," she said.

"You have thrown the onus on me now, and you think I cannot do less than tell you the nature of our quarrel."

"I should like to know whether it is a serious one, and whether it cannot be mended; but not if you do not wish to tell me," said Lucy.

"I'm afraid I am most to blame. Mr. Hollings called upon me the other day at my rooms, and I resented his confidences. We have not got on very well together for some time past, and it wanted very little, on my part, at least, to bring about a quarrel. I said I should be glad if he would keep out of my way in future, and he has taken me at my word. You know all now, Lucy."

There was a tone of annoyance in George Vanbrugh's closing words not to

be mistaken, and Lucy waited some moments before she ventured to speak again.

"May I ask you one more question, George?"

"If you please."

But despite George's permission, Lucy could not screw up her courage to the task. George waited and waited, his good nature once more getting the better of him, until at last Lucy, looking up anxiously, found he was smiling at her.

"Did you quarrel about me?" she asked, a big tear standing in each eye.

"Yes, and no, Lucy; that is, so far as I am concerned, I was perfectly indifferent to Job Hollings so long as he kept out of my sight. I was content to go my way and to let him take his. As he came here, I kept away," added George, scarcely knowing what to say.

"But you visited at Lanthradyne, George, when he was about the place," urged Lucy.

"I visited at Lanthradyne in the hope of winning a wife. I have no such hope now," cried Vanbrugh, warmly.

"You do not want to pain me, George, or make sport of me. What has that to do with Job Hollings?"

George looked quickly at his cousin, and she gazed steadily at him. It was too late to go back. In honour bound, George felt he could not stop now, but must perforce go on. It was better, perhaps, that it should be so.

"Lucy, I have been frank with you; I beseech you be frank with me in return."

Lucy's handkerchief was wanted two or three times before any reply came; but presently the little cambric was put

away, and the pale face looked bravely at George, as she said,—

"What do you want with me?"

"I have no right to put the question, Lucy, but there seems to me no alternative. I dare not speak to Kate, for I have quarrelled with Ferdinand over the very subject. A letter from yourself—a letter written in affectionate terms and addressed to one whose name is familiar to both of us—has been discovered by accident in this house. Is it truly a letter from yourself—or is it——"

"A falsehood!" cried Lucy, blushing scarlet.

"It is not yours?"

"Mine! Oh, George, George! how could you permit any one to show you such a thing without denouncing it as a forgery? Did you believe for one moment

that I could maintain a clandestine correspondence of such a nature?"

"I did not believe it, Lucy; I assure you I did not. Like a hot-tempered idiot I charged the man who showed it me with having himself written the document, and was punished for my rashness. But for all that my doubts were not shaken, and so much did I believe in the imposture that the letter was photographed before it left my hands."

"It was Ferdinand who showed it you, and it referred to Job Hollings. You cannot deny it," said Lucy, starting up and seizing George's arm.

"Yes, Lucy; but you must be careful what you say. I have offended Ferdinand past all hope of reconciliation by charging him with writing it. Do pray be careful."

"I will be careful, very careful. I thank you for your advice!"

Lucy drew herself to her full height and could scarcely utter the words. She said no more, but turned from her cousin to hide her tears.

"But, Lucy, you will not blame me? I have never had but one sentiment towards you. If I had not loved you, I should never have told you this."

Lucy's face was buried in the sofa-cushion; the only reply George received was a shaking of the head.

"Before you asked me to come here, I had resolved to see you upon this very subject; I had, indeed," pleaded George.

"And yet for three months—three whole months—you have believed this falsehood. I know now why you left the house so hurriedly after you had seen Kate; I know now the cause of your hatred for Job Hollings. What would you not believe of me?"

The angry woman looked up at George as she spoke, and the latter stood confessed in his villainy. He had no excuse to make; he would not have questioned Lucy's dictum had it been unjust. But her statement was perfectly true, and he knew it. It might have been through weakness that he had erred, but he was guilty nevertheless.

"Did Kate give you no hint?" he ventured, presently.

"Kate did not know," said Lucy, almost fiercely.

"But Ferdinand did," was George's diffident suggestion.

"You should have told Kate, if you did not like telling me. You would have done so, George, if you had any true regard for me."

George Vanbrugh, still standing humbly by the mantelpiece, convicted on his

own evidence, was willing and ready to receive any just punishment that might be inflicted, but he could not listen to Lucy's last words without reply.

"I will make no excuse for my conduct, Lucy, for I feel now that I ought to have acted otherwise—that I should at least have made Kate acquainted with the circumstances of that letter. I have deeply wronged you, and I shall ever regret it. But you must not say I have ceased to care for you; you know that is not true. It was rather through the blindness of my love that I made this fatal mistake."

"But by your studied avoidance of Job Hollings, and now by your open quarrel with him, you have given authority to a matter which otherwise would have been extinguished ere this for want of fuel. It is that which is so

vexing," cried Lucy, still alive to her wrongs.

"I can atone for that," said George, in his anxiety to please; "at any rate, in a measure. I know where to find Job, and can bring him back. He will come back if I ask him—I am sure he will. He does not know anything of the letter, I feel certain. May I go after him and fetch him back?"

"Who has seen the letter?" asked Lucy, still withholding her pardon.

"Only Ferdinand and myself—so far as I know," said George.

"Has he it still?"

"Yes—that is, I think so. You will forgive me, Lucy?"

Lucy held out her hand in token of reconciliation, and George Vanbrugh kissed it. He longed to ask that one other question he had delayed so long, but

the moment was scarcely an auspicious one. While he hesitated the opportunity was gone.

"Will you ask Ferdinand if he will come up to see me, George? The sooner we close this wretched business the better; and would you object to be with me during the time? I know it will be very disagreeable, but not more than it can be to me."

George cheerfully acceded to his cousin's request. He decidedly dreaded such an interview, but there was no alternative. He thought it probable Mallelieu might refuse to come, should there be a likelihood of a meeting between them, so George purposely gave the message to the maid as soon as he got downstairs, and proceeded once more to join Lucy.

They waited some minutes before it pleased the head of the family to obey

the summons. Lucy was in her former place on the sofa, and George was standing on the hearthrug, both of them ill at ease enough at the prospect before them. Thus they tarried in silence. Ferdinand, though he may not have expected meeting George Vanbrugh, was evidently prepared for something unpleasant, for no sooner had he entered than he sought at once to get the advantage by commencing the attack.

"It is excessively annoying, Lucy, to be called away in the middle of my work. It must be something that concerns me very much, I presume, or you would not have sent for me. What is it, pray?" Mallelieu only came half-way into the room in order to make his displeasure felt.

"It does concern you very much, Ferdinand, I am sorry to say, and me too," was Lucy's reply.

"And Vanbrugh, too, I presume, as he is here. If you wish to take me to task, I think you had better send for Kate also. You three are always leagued against me."

"Kate is upstairs with Ferdy," said Lucy, quietly. "We have no wish to disturb her, and there is no reason why she should know anything about this business. George has been telling me you have a wicked forgery in your possession. Will you give it to me?"

"I showed it him in confidence, and he had no right to betray that confidence."

"Will you give it to me?" repeated Lucy.

"Did he tell you also, Lucy, that he accused me of being the forger of it, if it is a forgery, as you say—me, your own brother-in-law?" cried Mallelieu, almost

beside himself at the manner he was treated by Lucy.

"That is not the question. Will you give it me?"

"Yes, if I have it still. I gave it to Vanbrugh, and I am not sure whether he returned it. At any rate, I have not forgotten his treatment of me in my own house, and I never shall—never, never," said the passionate man, gesticulating wildly as he spoke.

"I retained a copy of it, nothing more," put in George.

"Whether copy or original, you have kept it," said Mallelieu, turning to George for a moment. "He is just as bad as I am, Lucy. Why don't you call him to account as well as me? But of course you won't, because he has told you. He has become queen's evidence. But you have put me in a passion now, and I

have a good mind not to let you have the precious document at all."

"Do listen to reason, Ferdinand, for a moment. Surely for your own sake and for Kate's, if not for mine, you will give me this letter. It has nothing to do with George Vanbrugh, and I cannot be blamed if you have quarrelled over it. It purports to be in my handwriting, and I have a right to it."

"Yes, if it is a forgery," sneered Mallelieu.

"What do you mean, Ferdinand?" cried Lucy, with all the dignity she could muster.

George had inwardly resolved to take a passive part in the interview, but it was with difficulty he restrained himself at this juncture.

Mallelieu was not to be cowed by Lucy. She had so frequently humoured

him that he hardly gave her words consideration.

"What do I mean?" he hissed. "I will tell you, since you ask me to speak plainly. The note is addressed to that man Job Hollings."

"Well?"

"Well; even if it is destroyed now, it will not mend matters. Doesn't everybody know he has been coming here night after night, and haven't Kate and you had him in the dining-room time after time to talk to? What does all that mean, I should like to know?"

"I do not care to speak further on the subject," said Lucy, curtly. "Will you give me that letter, or am I to speak to Kate about it?"

"But he has been here, as you know, repeatedly, for weeks together—you know it; Vanbrugh, here, knows it."

As Mallelieu had turned to George, the latter considered himself free to reply.

"At any rate, he does not come now," George said.

"Does he not?" observed Mallelieu, sarcastically.

"No, he does not, Ferdinand. As George says, Job has not been here for some evenings past," cried Lucy.

The double reply only added to Mallelieu's passion. "Because George Vanbrugh, I suppose, has put him out of the way. I know they loved each other dearly," he almost shrieked.

"You would not impute a crime of that sort with impunity if we were alone, Mallelieu," said George, seriously.

"And it is only when we are alone that you dare accuse me."

"Will you give me that letter, Ferdinand?" asked Lucy.

"No; I will give it to the man to whom it is addressed, whenever George Vanbrugh produces him;" and Mallelieu hurried from the room in a whirlwind of passion.

CHAPTER VII.

PARKLE AND CO. IN DIFFICULTIES.

To do George Vanbrugh justice, his dislike for Job Hollings all disappeared the moment Lucy denounced that wretched letter a forgery. Nay, more; he felt beyond description how acutely he had wronged his honest rival, and how impossible it would be to efface the injury he had done poor Job. It was not that he feared the latter would hardly forgive him. Hollings would do this only too readily; but could George forgive himself? The tyranny and hastiness of temper he had displayed were to one like

Vanbrugh, who prided himself on his high notions about justice, a sore subject for reflection; still, anxious as he was to make reparation to Job, the duty could scarcely be deemed a pleasant one.

No wonder, therefore, that George Vanbrugh, having made up his mind to search out Job and crave the latter's forgiveness, did not approach the task in a merry mood. But the duty had to be done and George must do it. There was one consolation for him, if but a small one, that he had to bring back Job not alone to satisfy himself, but for the purpose of contenting Lucy and Ferdinand Mallelieu as well. As he set out upon his errand George Vanbrugh felt particularly grateful that this should be so.

He might have taken a hansom to Clerkenwell, and thus avoided a dirty and unsavoury walk. But he hesitated

lest the arrival of a cab in Hart Street might create too much of a sensation, and Vanbrugh was not just then in the mood to be stared at. Besides, there was no hurry. He knew the way now well enough, and could walk.

George did walk, and did not walk very fast either. He had no wish to be run over at the crossings, so waited patiently at every street corner for cart and 'bus to go before. Neither had he any desire to go astray, and hence repeatedly took the counsel of passers-by as to the best plan of reaching his destination. Gray's Inn Lane, long as it was, came to an end in time, and the hill that led past Cold Bath Fields was surmounted before George could possibly believe the fact.

The sun was shining in Hart Street, and George had never seen the place so lively. He was taken so by surprise that

he remained for several minutes by the public-house at the corner looking on in wonder. Children, just relieved from afternoon school, had taken possession of the trafficless thoroughfare, and set up cricket in the very middle of the highway. Racing and running and shouting, they made the shabby street alive with their active forms. A few brickbats covered by a youngster's jacket did duty for wicket, and bowling and hitting, amid incessant cries, was carried on with little respect to doors and windows.

George looked in at the public-house, in the hope he might see Job Hollings there; but Job, if he patronized such establishments, did not favour one so near home. Two loafing labourers, in unlaced boots and clayey trousers tied at the knee, were alone before the pewter counter, and they turned and lazily

apostrophized George's eyes as he peered in. There was the cheesemonger's next door, and Mrs. Parkle's dark-green shop next to that, and further down a vista of broken railings, narrow doorways, and dusty pavement.

The players took little heed of George Vanbrugh. Now and then they gave a rush to one side of the road or the other as ball or tip-cat flew into the gutter or among the litter on the pavement, but they were too much occupied in their noisy game to notice a stranger.

The door of Parkle and Co. was closed, so George rapped mildly to gain admittance. He knew the head of the firm too well to expect leave to enter would be accorded him, so at the end of a minute or two George further opened the door and asked if Mr. Hollings were at home.

There sat Mrs. Parkle as usual at the back of the dark shop glaring at the intruder, and, as usual, neither encouraging nor refusing admittance. As George thus stood with the door in his hand, ill luck must needs send the cricket-ball in his direction, and before he was aware of the fact the missile had darted past and hidden itself in the black recesses of the shop.

"You've done it now, Corkey; it's gone right into Mother Parkle's."

"Get out—it ain't my fault; that cove there opened the door."

"I say, marm, chuck us out our ball; we didn't go to do it," cried one urchin coming forward, but not venturing to pass George in the doorway.

Still Mrs. Parkle's red eyes glared, and still she made no answer.

Little forms began to muster thickly

round Vanbrugh's legs, and he deemed it best to stand down from the step and withdraw for a moment until the players had got back their own. The boys did not venture into the shop; only their unkempt heads and ragged arms were stretched forth appealingly in the doorway.

"Please, Mrs. Parkle, chuck us out our ball."

"It was that bloke that done it, mum; not us."

"You might as well, mum; we didn't do it a-purpose," whined a third. "It's all through him opening the door."

"Who?" cried Mrs. Parkle, putting down her spectacles.

"Why, him, if you please, mum; he done it," cried everybody, pointing to George.

Mrs. Parkle still looked intently at the

cricketers without troubling herself about George.

"May I come in, mum, and look for it?" pleaded one of the boys—the most scantily attired of all, an urchin with bare feet and black locks, with nothing on but a pair of trousers, a ragged shirt, and one brace.

Mrs. Parkle said nothing, and the boy, taking silence for consent, advanced stealthily with his shoeless feet.

"There it is, Jim, by the old gal's foot," cried a sharp friend by the door.

But poor Jim was destined to suffer for his temerity. Before he reached the object, quick and cunning as he was, Mrs. Parkle's talons were fastened in his shock-hair, and held him a prisoner. Jim kicked and screamed, but his naked feet could do little execution, and Mrs. Parkle never loosed him till she had buffeted her-

self out of breath and inflicted dire punishment with her bony arms. Not until then did Jim manage to tear himself away and rejoin his companions.

The boy roared out with open throat so long as he was in Mrs. Parkle's clutches, but no sooner had he reached the door again than he whooped and grinned and made faces at the enemy. In a moment, too, the whole behaviour of the lads changed from an abject and humble nature to one of savage retaliation. Not another thought was bestowed upon the ragged ball that lay out of their reach. With one voice and one accord the whole party joined in chorus,—

"Old Moth-er Par-kle.
Come out, you dirty ras-cal.
Old Moth-er Par-kle.
Come out, you dirty ras-cal."

Flesh and blood could not long with-

stand this terrible din, and in a very short time the chorus had the effect of bringing Mrs. Parkle in a rush to the door. The excitement of this step only increased the enjoyment, and although the old lady followed her tormentors some distance into the road, they were too fleet to be caught. An ignominious retreat and shutting to of the door at once brought back the scattered forces, and, after a reconnoissance or two, hostilities recommenced. One courageous scout threw open the door with a yell, and Mrs. Parkle being discovered in the back of the shop, her tormentors lost no time in harassing her again. By way of tempting the foe, a boy was now and then pushed a few paces into the shop by his fellows, or some adventuresome youth rushed as far as the counter and hit it with his cricket bat, the more timid contenting

themselves with casting refuse from the gutter through the doorway; but, whatever they did, they steadily continued to repeat their chorus with mechanical regularity,—

> "Old Moth-er Par-kle,
> Come out, you dirty ras-cal."

It was a difficult matter for George Vanbrugh to act under these circumstances. He walked to and fro between the corner and Parkle and Co.'s emporium, undecided whether to espouse the cause of the firm or remain neutral. At one time it seemed as if the decision would hardly rest in his hands, for the boys appeared disposed to treat him as an enemy and make him the subject of attack; but his stature and strength evidently convinced them of the unwisdom of the idea. Be this as it may, they certainly concentrated their forces

upon the Parkle stronghold, and went on advancing and retiring with conspicuous bravery, as the fortune of war required.

After much thought Vanbrugh conceived the idea of calling a truce by the purchase of a second ball, for which he was perfectly willing to find the money. But the operation was a delicate one. He knew very well that as soon as coin was forthcoming he would be mobbed by the whole crowd. By good fortune, however, he was enabled to treat with one of the party without the knowledge of the rest. This was Jim, who, having been somewhat roughly treated by the enemy, began to feel his wounds acutely now the excitement was over. He had consequently ceased to take an active part in the hostilities, and retired, under cover of the cheesemonger's awning, to make good his damages. Jim pronounced the ball

to be worth "tuppence" when questioned on the subject by George, and the latter, taking care to give no more, paid this amount into Jim's hands for the purchase of another missile. Jim was not long in tightening up his solitary brace and executing the commission, and the attractions of a brand-new ball were quite sufficient to call off the rest of the pack from Mrs. Parkle's door.

George Vanbrugh did not wait after viewing the success of his stratagem. He was pleased enough to get out of the noisy street and proceed with his mission. He pushed open the creaking door once more, this time without parley, and passed into the shop.

Unluckily for him, Mrs. Parkle was not in the same state of mind as himself. She was lying in wait for a further attack, and, no sooner had George taken a step

indoors, than he found himself roughly seized by a passionate woman, shaking all over with excitement, and tearing at his coat in the wildest frenzy.

"Why, woman, are you mad?" cried George. Fortunately he had sense enough to close the door after him, so that the cricketers could not perceive the ludicrous scene.

"Will you loose me? Can't you see who I am?" George pinned the woman's arms and pressed her backwards in a chair, where she sat with her hair dishevelled and her white lips working with passion.

"My name is Vanbrugh. I am one of Mr. Hollings's friends."

"I don't care who you are. You have no right here. You are worse than any of them." Mrs. Parkle rose, meditating another spring, so George pressed her

down in the chair again, rather more roughly than before.

"Is Mr. Hollings here?" he cried, in a peremptory tone, for he was getting to have quite enough of Mrs. Parkle's eccentric behaviour. "Is Job Hollings here?"

"No, he ain't."

"I don't believe you, so I shall look for myself. Rest there, do you hear? If you get up out of that chair, I'll put you down again, remember." George's sharp words had their effect on Mrs. Parkle, and, after waiting an instant to see if she obeyed, he gravely picked up his hat, which had fallen at the commencement of the scuffle, and proceeded across the shop into the yard.

The yard was empty. Black carboys and rotten hampers lined the path to the laboratory as before, and empty bottles,

damp straw, and broken glass were everywhere. The laboratory door was not open, but it yielded to his hand. There were Job's retorts and filters, his stock bottles, and his big pestle and mortar, but no Job. He moved some of the beakers and vessels that were on the table, and they left a rim of dust behind, as if they had stood untouched for days.

"He has gone on one of his long tours, I suppose," said George to himself. "I might have known he was not at home by those boys worrying the old lady so." George looked at his gloves. They were of dark kid, fortunately, but he had ruined them with stains and dirt.

Mrs. Parkle was in the chair where he had left her, and the poor woman presented such a dire spectacle that his heart quite smote him for having treated her so roughly. Rage and fury had given

place to dejection and low spirits, and the plentiful tears coursing down her thin cheeks were pitiable to behold.

"Has Job left you all alone here, Mrs. Parkle?" asked George.

Mrs. Parkle nodded her head dolefully from side to side, but made no other reply.

"Has he been gone long?"

The same answer as before.

"Can I assist you into the house or upstairs?" suggested George, anxious to be as accommodating as he could.

As Mrs. Parkle only replied with her tears, George deemed it best to wait a while, hoping that a change might come over her spirits presently. He looked out at the cricketers; they were on the point of going home, and Jim had come forward, as trustee, to claim the ball and carry it away. They cared little for Mrs.

Parkle and her wrongs now, as they went off in a little knot up the street, Jim the last of all, for he had to secure his jacket from the wicket and distribute the heap of brickbats upon which it had been posed.

"Job Hollings—oh, dear me!" muttered Mrs. Parkle, presently.

"Eh!" said George, in a lively tone. "I came to ask you where he was, you know."

"Gone away."

"Gone away and left you?"

"Yes," said the old woman, still whimpering; "left me, to run after a fine lady. I knew he would; he always denied it, but I knew he would. Oh, dear me!"

"Nonsense! Mrs. Parkle; nonsense! He will come back again, you may be sure."

"No, he won't; he said he wouldn't.

He said he owed me nothing, and no more he did. But what's to become of a poor old woman like me, left all alone? Oh, dear me! oh, dear me!" Evidently groaning relieved Mrs. Parkle's spirits, for when George had given her five minutes' groaning time she appeared ever so much better.

"Job Hollings did not say where he was going?" he asked, presently.

"No, he didn't; but I know very well. He has run away with that young woman who came here speaking to me, with her proud airs and fine graces. I know."

"Yes, Mrs. Parkle, you told me all about that last time I was here, remember; but Job has not gone after her, I can answer for that."

George's words had not the soothing effect he intended to convey; on the contrary, since they contradicted the

decided view she had chosen to take of Job's absence, they incensed Mrs. Parkle in a high degree.

"What do you know about it, you jackanapes? What right have you to come here? Who are you, to tell me to my face a pack of lies? I know it, I tell you; I know it!" She would have risen from her chair again had not George sternly raised his hand to forbid her, whereupon her temper once more subsided into a series of low groans,—"Oh, dear me! oh, dear me!"

He turned to the counter, and took up a bundle of letters addressed in Job's laborious hand. George looked over them in the hope of finding one addressed to himself, but they were business documents all of them.

"Won't he come back to post these?" asked George.

Mrs. Parkle shook her head, and muttered another "Oh, dear me!"

"He has left the business to take care of itself, then?"

"Yes," whimpered Mrs. Parkle.

"And that lavender field at Dalebrook, what will become of that?" asked George.

"He said he was going there to make arrangements about selling it; but he has run off instead with his fine lady; I know he has."

The only chance of finding Job Hollings, then, was to go to Dalebrook. It certainly was a likely road for Job to have taken; the walk through Wrotham was a favourite one with him, and as Hollings was known in that part of Kent, his discovery should not be difficult. There was, indeed, no other course, so George could not be very long making up his mind.

He once more proffered his services to assist Mrs. Parkle, or lead her upstairs, but the old woman would not suffer him to approach. George had cowed her to such a degree that so long as he remained in sight she was in terror of him. He could learn no more about Job, so there was no reason for delaying his departure. But before leaving Hart Street George called in at the cheesemonger's and told him of the eccentric behaviour of his neighbour, news that failed to create any feeling of surprise.

It was only when he issued from the gloomy premises of Parkle and Co. that George Vanbrugh became fully aware of the untidiness of his dress. His coat and cravat had been disordered by Mrs. Parkle's rough treatment, hat and gloves were soiled, and his face and beard, from the heat, excitement, perspiration, and

dust through which he had passed, were grimy and dirty to a degree.

He quickly worked his way into Gray's Inn Lane, and by avoiding main thoroughfares hoped to be able to reach Spring Gardens without running the risk of meeting any of his fine friends. He would gladly have taken refuge in a cab, but not an empty vehicle was to be seen until he reached the neighbourhood of Long Acre, and then the distance was so short it was hardly worth while driving. Besides, he had walked himself into such a heat that a hansom must inevitably have given him cold.

He had to pass the corner of his club, and before doing so slackened his pace a bit to reconnoitre. It was fortunate he did so, for a tall gentleman and a short one, no other than Mr. Danford and Mr. Alpha Wright, at that moment passed

with measured steps straight in front of him, two exquisite examples of Young England. George tarried with bated breath till they were fairly past, and then scudded across the street as fast as he could. His very cunning betrayed him, for Mr. Wright's sharp eyes were at once attracted by the big figure running in an oblique line towards the opposite pavement, and much to the horror of Danford, Alpha shouted his friend's name.

"Halloa, there—George—George Vanbrugh!"

Vanbrugh turned. He would gladly have got away, but rather than have his name called out across the road he came back.

"You would never have seen us, old boy, if I hadn't shouted," cried Mr. Wright, as soon as George stepped up on the kerb. "It was the merest chance

in the world I caught sight of you, but I could swear to your back anywhere."

"Ah, how do you do? I was in a hurry to get home. I am not fit to be seen. I want a wash and a brush down so badly you can't tell. See you both presently." And George wanted to be again.

"No, hang it, don't go, Vanbrugh. You can put yourself straight here just as well as at home. I wanted to see you on very important business—whether you could go out of town with me for a couple of days." Wright held on so tightly to George's arm that the latter was fain to stay.

"I don't care much about going into the club in this guise," George was beginning to say.

"Doesn't matter a rap," put in Mr. Wright, briskly. "We'll take care the

hall porter shan't see you. Here, I will go and talk to the man, so that you can slip in unobserved. Come on; don't be afraid; he won't see you."

George could hardly refuse after such an offer on the part of his friend, and greatly to the latter's satisfaction actually did succeed in obtaining admittance to the lavatory without the knowledge of the dread official in question.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PILGRIMAGE.

THERE was a reason why George Vanbrugh suffered himself to be led into the Loungers by his friends. If Alpha Wright wanted to go out of town for a few days, it occurred to Vanbrugh that they might just as well be companions in the search after Job Hollings. The susceptible Alpha was interested enough in Lucy Medlicott to serve her, even if he had not been one whose special calling in life it was to succour lovely woman in distress.

George put it frankly to his friend

that same evening after they had dined together. He first telegraphed to Jordan, at Lanthradyne, asking if Hollings had been seen about the village, and then rattled off in a cab to Notting Hill to acquaint the sisters of the result of his visit to Clerkenwell. He mentioned the plan he had of walking down into the country, and from his knowledge of Job's haunts in the neighbourhood, there was little doubt, he said, of discovering the missing one.

He found Lucy in much better spirits than when he had left her. The feeling of relief that the estrangement between themselves had come to an end, and also that all misunderstandings were cleared up between Job Hollings and George, far outweighed any irritation her brother-in-law's conduct caused her. When George, too, with mock heroism, assured her in

doughty terms that Job Hollings should be brought back within a week, alive or dead, to swear to the truth or falseness of the letter, all Lucy's native gaiety forthwith returned.

"I don't think Job's testimony will be necessary to convince you, George, at any rate. Those who require proof of the circumstance can hardly call themselves my friends."

"It boots not," was George's melodramatic rejoinder. "The varlet shall hither to my lady's feet."

"Who frightened him away?" laughed Lucy.

"Please not to ask unpleasant questions, Lucy; you have put all the knightly notions out of my head. You used to do precisely the same thing, I remember, when we were boy and girl together, and I vowed all sorts of mighty things

to Kate and you. I shan't play any more."

Lucy laughed again.

"Here am I about to enter upon a distant pilgrimage, in company with another trusty knight, that will take us several miles from London."

"Who is the other knight, pray?" interrupted Lucy.

"I was just going to inform you. Alpha Wright wants to run out of town, he tells me, so I am going to ask him to accompany me."

But Lucy thought an expedition such as George proposed would be better not undertaken at all. So far as she was concerned there was no need for Job's immediate return, and as Ferdy was so much better they would themselves be returning to Lanthradyne in a few days, and could meet Job there if he happened to be in the neighbourhood.

George shook his head gravely as he listened to Lucy's arguments.

"It won't do, Lucy. I have made a serious mistake, and I must set matters right as soon as I can. There will be no need for Job to come here, as you say—in fact, he will do as pleases him best; but I am bound to seek out the poor fellow and make what amends I can."

"When do you go?" asked Lucy.

"To-morrow morning, if Alpha is ready." And then George acted the doughty knight once more, but it was only as an excuse for kissing Lucy's taper fingers when he said good-bye.

Alpha Wright declared himself ready to accompany George on his walk. An answer to the telegram came in the course of the evening; it was to the effect that Job Hollings had not been

seen at Lanthradyne, nor was he expected there, for the lavender field had been put up for sale and no longer required his attendance. George handed the telegram to Wright.

"That is the man we are going to look for, Alpha; there is not much of a clue so far, you see."

"All the more credit to us when we find him, don't you know," was Mr. Wright's ready reply.

If George did not tell everything concerning Job, Alpha Wright was informed of quite enough to secure his sympathy. Alpha remembered Job very well; he had laughed heartily over the messenger's quaint appearance that night at the club, and when George entered into Job's history, and explained how much both Lucy and himself were beholden to the honest fellow, poor Alpha's susceptible

nature was more than ever impressed in Job's favour.

"Don't say another word, Vanbrugh, or you'll make me cry, I know you will. I am so awfully sorry I laughed at the poor devil, you can't tell."

"Job has forgotten that long ago, I'll be bound. If we can only find him we will soon make matters square again."

"Only it was hard lines on the poor beggar; to take the trouble to come up into the billiard-room with his message, and then to be laughed at for his pains. I feel a beastly coward, Vanbrugh, so I tell you; I am dreadfully vexed with myself.—Yes, I did ring, confound you, twice, if you want to know,"—this to a waiter; "some whisky, Irish, hot. What will you have, Vanbrugh?"

Alpha Wright continued low-spirited until the whisky, Irish, hot, arrived.

They discussed Job and they discussed Lucy, Alpha growing warmer and more confidential as they talked. Presently he said, "You must think me a great fool, Vanbrugh, and so must Miss Medlicott; but, don't you know, when a fellow is in love he rarely thinks of anybody else."

"Unless it's his mistress," said George.

"Yes, but I mean of anybody's interest but his own. Of course, I know now that I never had any chance with Lucy Medlicott; but at the time, I recollect, there seemed no obstacle big enough to stand in my way. You will laugh, I know, but it never occurred to me that your cousin was in love with you, Vanbrugh. Why didn't you tell me, old fellow, when I came to you at Spring Gardens?"

"I am afraid it would have made little difference with a lady's man like you.

You would have been only more earnest of purpose, if I know anything about your nature, Alpha. A man, I find, learns his value very quickly when he has to do with a woman. I have taken to rate myself at a much lower figure lately, I can tell you."

Mr. Wright looked curiously at Vanbrugh to see if the latter was in earnest, and afraid lest George should be, he took care not to express an opinion. On reflection, possibly, Mr. Wright's ideas might have coincided with his friend's, but for all that he would never have uttered such heresy.

"At any rate, Vanbrugh, it was very good of you to let me try my luck, and I am just as grateful to you as if I had been successful. Few men are so chivalrous."

"I am afraid there was no chivalry

about my motives, Alpha," said George, laughing. "If Lucy Medlicott ever takes a husband, it will be one of her own choosing, and my recommendation will weigh but little in the scale. You may guess how right I am, when I tell you that I have recommended myself on several occasions, and to no purpose. It is singular, isn't it?"

"Well, it is, don't you know," said Alpha, seriously, for he hardly thought Vanbrugh could be joking.

As Vanbrugh was not anxious to say more upon the subject, and Alpha Wright was too uncertain of his ground to venture further without encouragement, there was no alternative but to sharply summon the waiter once more as a means of changing the conversation. And then, as the companions had resolved to start betimes in the morning, George Van-

brugh knocked out his pipe and suggested turning in.

Mr. Wright lived at Blackheath, at any rate when he was at home, with his aunt; so it was arranged that George should go over by an early train and breakfast before starting. Their way would pass through Eltham and Foot's Cray, so that Blackheath formed a convenient point of departure.

"It reminds you of our tramp in the Tyrol last year," was Mr. Wright's remark when they had fairly set out on their walk. "Coming over the Pfandelscharte, don't you know."

George was reminded vividly of that trip, but only by reason of his companion's elaborate outfit. It was the same, including knapsack and flask, with which Wright had so gallantly scaled the Tyrol passes. Perhaps it was because George

had taken no notice, so far, of the equipment in question that his companion was induced thus indirectly to call attention to it. Alpha always distinguished himself by the completeness of his pedestrian arrangements. They were his strong point; it was only in the matter of actual walking that he proved wanting occasionally.

"Only we mustn't have any more of your love-making tricks, Alpha. You would be a capital pedestrian if you would only give as much attention to walking as you do to the fair sex."

"That's all very well; but how can a man help his nature? Some fellows like work and others like enjoying themselves. There are men who care for billiards and smoking, and others who don't. Now, I have noticed how girls are fonder of some fellows than they are of others."

"And you belong to the beloved, I suppose, eh, Alpha?"

"No, I didn't say that. But joking apart, Vanbrugh, don't you think I am right? What is your own experience, now?"

"Well, I fear I should have to put myself in the second class," laughed George, as he looked down upon the companion marching valiantly beside him.

"Well, then, that's just it. That's just why you don't run after the girls and I do. I mean, you hardly find it worth your while, don't you know."

"I do not get encouragement enough, you mean."

"Well, if you like to put it that way," cried Mr. Wright, as he swung along in the centre of the road, on the best terms with himself.

They discussed other of Mr. Alpha Wright's philosophic ideas as they sped on their way. Fresh air, green hedges, and a brisk walk are wonderful things to beget confidences. They had left London far behind them now, and the spring sunshine seemed clearer and brighter every step they took. The tardy oak, standing sentinel on the road, had scarcely put forth its leaves of yellowish-green, but the luxuriant hedgerows of hazel and hawthorn, fresh and bright in the sun, shone like burnished emerald. Even the green borders by the wayside, that so soon grow shabby from the heat and dust of summer, were verdant to look upon, and marked a filigree line with its white and yellow flowerets in front of the darker-hued foliage.

But it was from a declivity in the road, as you passed on through the undulating

country, that the rich verdure of the Kentish fields was seen at its best. Manors and farms, where these were visible, appeared imbedded in leafy luxuriance, and from the dark branches of the fir to the soft verdant needles of the larch there was over all a delicate bloom of transparent green. Meadow and copse, growing corn and clay-red furrows, orchard and grazing land, formed a bright patchwork that had all the loveliness of a well-cultivated garden.

"We never saw such green as that in Italy, Alpha."

"Didn't we?" asked George's companion, as he marched along.

"Nor such golden buttercups. Look at that shining slope yonder, where the brown cattle are lying knee-deep in the grass; it seems enamelled with gold."

"Ah, I often wish I knew more about

flowers, Vanbrugh; it must be awfully jolly to be able to tell one plant from another, don't you know."

"Then we had better find Job Hollings as soon as we can; he will teach you as much botany in a day's walk as you would learn in a month at your books."

They halted for the night at Wrotham, as George and Job had done previously. Vanbrugh had noticed the red blinds of an inn in the square opposite the grey church tower, and this he believed was Job Hollings's usual quarters. But there was no news to be gleaned here; either the landlord had no recollection of Job, or did not choose to have any.

Vanbrugh was at first undecided whether he should make his way over the Mereworth woods to Wateringbury or pass on through Maidstone. But he remembered how lovingly Job had spoken of the

green-margined banks of the Medway, of the blue forget-me-nots and golden cowslips that decked the meadow-land by the river, and he hesitated no longer. He would make for old Teston Bridge and follow the course of the river to Yalding, when they could strike south once more.

They walked by the windings of the lazy stream, the brimming water reaching to the very edge of the carpet-like verdure. The sun glowed hot as they passed through the long grass, and the travellers looked longingly at the placid river for a pool to bathe. Yellow water-lilies and gigantic buttercups grew in the still back-waters, where pollard willow and hazel-bush made but a poor defence against the sun; while patches of gay flags, over which the flighty dragon-fly hovered, marked here and there a marsh or morass.

At a turn in the river, where the bush-grown banks stood high above the water, was a lock and a bridge across the stream. An old inn and a few cottages stood near the spot, the inn frequented by bargemen, who seized the opportunity of a temporary halt to refresh thirsty nature. Here they fraternized at the table and benches in front of the door with carters and yokels, who made the crossing of the bridge by their teams a similar excuse for tarrying a while.

Possibly the heat of the day had caused a greater assembly than usual of boatmen and carters, for when Vanbrugh and Wright arrived on the scene the land-lady of the hostelry was as busy as she well could be serving customers with ale in huge mugs of blue and white earthen-ware.

Vanbrugh did not lose an opportunity

of questioning the company upon the subject of Job Hollings, but neither bargeman nor carter could be made to take an interest in George's inquiries. Whether it was the power of the sun or the potency of the beer, they maintained from first to last an attitude of silence and drowsiness only broken by an occasional grunt, as one party after another took their last deep draught and departed.

Alpha Wright had found a cool couch upon the grass, under shadow of a group of elms by the road, and here he was content to lie down and smoke while George proceeded with his questions.

"I don't think they like the look of me, Alpha," exclaimed George, when the last group had broken up and gone on their way; "there's no alternative now but to go in and speak to the landlady."

The landlady proved to be no more

communicative than her customers. George's burly form was taken evidently for that of a detective, and the hostess briskly began to wash up her mugs as she shyly gave her answers. She knew nothing of Job, nor of any other wayfarer like or unlike him. She never noticed people along the road, nor people who rested in front of her house. She had no curiosity, and besides, her eyesight was not very good.

What was George to do if he could get no news? Whether the people had seen Job or not, it was very clear they never meant to tell. He might as well give up the job if he could not succeed better than this.

When he came to the door again there was Alpha Wright in conversation with a buxom young woman, leaning over her cottage palings and regarding that gen-

tleman as he reclined upon the soft turf beyond.

"Ah, but," said Alpha, looking smilingly up at the fair questioner, "that's because we walked so fast in the sun."

"Then you must be very foolish fellows," returned the woman.

"Oh, come I say, you are hard up on a chap. Do you mean to say you like a white complexion better than a dark one? Why, I have come out on purpose to get a bit bronzed. A man can't be handsome if he has a pasty-white face."

"Nor a yellow one, either," laughed the bright little woman. "All you Londoners have yellow faces; I suppose it's the smoke."

Mr. Wright protested more vehemently than before, and in his earnestness got upon his feet. "Why, what do you know about Londoners, I should like to know?"

"Oh, I've seen plenty of Londoners come this way; there's a poor fellow staying with me now, for the matter of that, and his face is sallow enough, heaven knows."

"Perhaps he is ill?" suggested Wright.

"He is a poor man, and I wish I knew how to make him better," continued the woman.

"Is he so very bad?" asked Alpha.

The little body shook her head. The man was bad, God help him! as he could see if he wished. Would he like to come in?

Whether it was the woman's dimpled face or a charitable desire that prompted the motive, Alpha Wright accepted the invitation, and George in bewonderment saw his friend accompanying the newly-made acquaintance into her cottage. It was so characteristic of Alpha to make

friends with good-looking women, and the incident bore so pointedly upon Wright's recent philosophy, that George laughed heartily as he surveyed the scene from the inn door. The politeness of Alpha, followed by the disappearance of enslaved and enslaver, made George forget for the moment the non-success of his search in the quaintness of this incident.

But what was George Vanbrugh's surprise to see his friend reappear almost immediately at the threshold and beckon. Vanbrugh was to be introduced to the woman and her family, and bear witness to the mighty power of Alpha Wright over the fair sex. George was nothing loth, and crossing the road went up the little garden that led to the cottage.

The door stood wide open to admit the sunny air and the sweet odour of

wallflowers from the garden. There was no passage, and one step across the threshold brought the visitor into the middle of a small red-tiled apartment, the walls hung with vividly coloured prints and a huge Dutch clock. Alpha and the woman were in a corner with their backs towards him, and as they turned he saw the form of a man seated on a low wooden settle.

"I have found him for you, Vanbrugh," said Alpha; "but he is very weak and ill."

"He has been so ever since he came here, sir, a week ago. He told me he hadn't any friends," said the little woman to George.

"We must have a doctor at once to look after him," said Alpha.

"That's what I said, sir, and my good man too; but he wouldn't have it. He

declares he isn't ill, but only tired—very tired."

George Vanbrugh said nothing. His eyes met those of Job Hollings for a moment, and then he turned away to the diamond paned casement and looked out upon the summer scene, so full of life and light.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. SHORTER RECEIVES A VISIT FROM HIS FIRST CLIENT.

Mr. Edward Shorter was in high glee as he walked up and down his chambers in the Middle Temple. He was dressing, taking breakfast, and indulging his excited nature by moving rapidly about at one and the same time. A quick glance at the looking-glass in his bedroom was followed by a bite and sup in the adjoining apartment, his hair still wet and rough with the morning bath; and, on returning, in order to bring this hair of his to a becoming state of smoothness

by the aid of a pair of hard brushes, wielded with considerable force and celerity, he carried back with him to the toilet-table an official document on blue foolscap, that was the fulcrum of all this unwonted excitement.

The official letter appointed Edward Shorter, Esquire, Barrister-at-Law, one of the Counsel for the Treasury to conduct prosecutions in the Central Criminal Court. It was the first step up the ladder of fame, and Mr. Shorter could not trust the letter out of his sight for a moment. He put it down in front of him on the toilet-table while he plied the brushes with renewed vigour.

The appointment had not come altogether unexpectedly. It was pretty well known that sooner or later Ned Shorter must get it, and during the past few days he had received a hint that his name

had been before the Attorney-General. He had long enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most hard-working and energetic young barristers at the criminal bar, as he was certainly the most successful that practised in the Central Criminal Court. The appointment would be a sad loss to his "habitual criminal" clients, no doubt; but, as Mr. Shorter reflected when he put down his brushes, "we must all of us make some sacrifices in this world of ours."

It was just five years since he got his first brief—on that memorable occasion when, in a famous police-court case, he shut up his note-book as reporter and undertook the defence of a prisoner. The case, as we know, grew in importance; other persons were implicated, and Mr. Shorter continued to defend when the proceedings were remitted to the Old

Bailey. It was as if the affair had occurred but yesterday, as if struggling for a livelihood was still a necessity. His efforts, and those of George Vanbrugh, in connection with the magazines, the drama, and the press, as they waited year after year, were still vivid in the barrister's mind. How well he remembered the many false starts he had made. When at last he succeeded in getting a short story accepted by one of the magazines—for which, by the way, no payment ever came—how fervently he believed his fortune was made as a novelist; how diligent he was in spreading the report that he feared so much of his time would be taken up in story-writing, that it would be almost impossible for him to accept a retainer unless the case were an important one and no other barrister of standing could be found.

But magazine editors, he discovered, wanted no more of his stories, and half the young barristers in the Temple, so he afterwards found out, were busy scribbling with the same view as himself.

The farce that Shorter wrote, and which was played for fifty consecutive nights at the Comus Theatre, we have already mentioned. But this second start was no better than the first, except that it brought the author a few pounds, for it led nowhere. That three-act comedy of his, which was to fill stalls and boxes with all the wit and beauty of London, and was complete down to the most minute stage directions, and included, indeed, coloured sketches of the costumes and an outline plan of exits and entrances, was never seen again after he and Vanbrugh had conveyed it in a cab to the stage-door. The stage-

doorkeeper promised faithfully to take care of it, and he kept his word. The manuscript never came back, and Mr. Shorter was fain to content himself with the remark of the manager—conveyed at second-hand through the doorkeeper—that he, the manager, had never read anything like it.

In the more humble capacity of a reporter for the daily press, the start was so far no failure that it secured him an average income of seven or eight shillings a day; but the reporting-box of a London police-court did not open out much prospect. Mr. Shorter, however, had been quite willing to sacrifice his pride in the earning of a livelihood, and hence he continued to indite upon flimsies with perfect content, until that lucky moment came when he enrolled himself among the defenders of the op-

pressed. Since that time he had never wanted a client. Grateful prisoners spoke his praises on every occasion, and it was on the recommendation of those whom he had successfully defended that he received most of his briefs. His comparative youth, as also the freshness of his speech, which carried with it an aspect of truth and frankness, were qualities that the class of clients with whom he had to do appreciated in the highest degree, as also possibly the manner, which Mr. Shorter possessed, of being discreetly insubordinate to the bench upon occasion—always, of course, in the interests of his clients.

And now that big, blue letter, in formal round hand, told him that his capacity as a lawyer was appreciated by others beyond the unprincipled vagabonds whose interests he had hitherto served. Mr.

Shorter could not but feel amused by the way in which his promotion had been brought about.

"I shall have to give up some of my old tricks with the jury, though," said Mr. Shorter, with just one pang of regret, as he settled himself into his coat and stood before the glass and the big letter. "It will be an awful trial, I know, when I see a heavy butterman as foreman of the jury, who conscientiously follows and believes all you say, and is as impressionable as his wares. It's deuced hard on a fellow to have to forego such a chance at times."

The brisk little barrister shook off the thought as too disagreeable to dwell upon, and bustled into the sitting-room to finish his breakfast. Before he had been seated a moment he jumped up again.

"By the way, I must telegraph the news to George at once; he will be more delighted than I am."

But no sooner had he taken up a telegram form than he remembered George was out of town, so there was nothing for it but to sit down again and quietly finish the bit of toast in his mouth.

"I will run up to Notting Hill this afternoon and get his address; it is a long time since I called on the Mallelieus, and I shall be able to kill two birds with one stone."

That settled, Mr. Shorter looked at the important letter again; he held it in one hand while he sipped his coffee with the aid of the other.

How many times he would have read through the simple wording there is no knowing, had he not been disturbed by a

knock at the door. The letter was thrown on one side in a moment, and the barrister's face hidden behind the morning paper, as he shouted "Come in."

The gentleman who came in was no taller than Mr. Shorter himself. He looked like an American, had a black goatee beard, and wore very loose clothes.

"You are Mr. Edward Shorter, I think," said the stranger, politely.

"Who are you?" was the sharp rejoinder.

The gentleman was troubled with a nasty cough.

"My name is (cough),—that is, I took the liberty of calling, Mr. Shorter (cough), with the idea that you would be kind enough (cough)——"

"Just so," cried Mr. Shorter, rising suddenly. "Get out of this. I can't have you here, you know that very well.

Go and consult some respectable solicitor first of all; you know what I mean; and even then I fear I shall not be able to do anything for you, my man. Come, get out."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Shorter, but you misunderstand—you really do. I am not in want of professional assistance just now, thank goodness; I wished to see you personally. You know me, I am sure."

"I am sure I do not, and what is more, I don't want to know you."

Mr. Shorter did not speak quite so decisively as before, and he relinquished his intention of turning the man out of doors; but before sitting down, he said, "Look here, my fine fellow, you may say what you wish to say, if you like; but I'll have a policeman in at once if I consider your conduct suspicious. Now go or stay as you please."

"Thank you, Mr. Shorter; then I'll stay."

"Very good; keep where you are, close to the door, and cut along with your story as fast as you can," said the barrister, as he quietly resumed his newspaper.

The new-comer bowed politely and did as he was told. "I have come to make a bargain with Mr. George Vanbrugh—of course you know now who I am?"

"I told you just now I knew nothing about you, didn't I?" cried the barrister, sharply, without looking from behind the newspaper.

"And yet, Mr. Shorter, I gave you your first brief."

"Do you want me to pitch you out of that door, or do you not? I will in half a minute if you say any more on the subject. I tell you I don't know you."

"Very well, Mr. Shorter. On the

whole I am glad of it. I may mention, then, that for some time past Mr. George Vanbrugh and I have not been getting on very well together. I have made him peaceful overtures and he has replied in a very unhandsome manner through the press."

"Through the press?" broke in Shorter; "through the *Daily Telegraph*, you mean."

"Yes, Mr. Shorter, through the columns of the *Daily Telegraph*."

The barrister cleared his throat and looked at his visitor as if he was going to say something, but he took a sip of coffee instead, and resumed his newspaper.

"Mr. Vanbrugh intimated that he would do his utmost to injure me, and I might do my worst, if it so pleased me —that was the nature of the announcement."

"Well?"

"Well, Mr. Vanbrugh has succeeded so far that I have not been able to put my hand to a thing for six months. Before I have been a fortnight in a new place the police get scent of me, and I am obliged to be off. I want Mr. Vanbrugh to call off the police."

"You want me to give Mr. Vanbrugh that message, I suppose?"

"Yes, Mr. Shorter; or, as you are his adviser, perhaps you would take it upon yourself to do so."

Instead of growing angry at the man's assurance, the little barrister smiled and put down the paper. "Upon my word, Mr.—I mean—whatever your name is, you seem an impudent fellow."

The visitor acquiesced in a bow.

"I suppose the police are looking after you at this moment, eh?"

The visitor inclined his head again. "And cannot find me," he said, with politeness.

"They would not dream of looking for you in my office, you think?"

"Just so," returned the other.

"But you know, I suppose, that I could have you locked up at once, and thus conclude the bargain, as you call it, without further trouble?"

"I knew when I came here that I had to do with an honourable man."

"Tut, tut!" said Shorter, laughing, as he rose to take up his favourite position with his back to the mantel-piece. "You knew I would appreciate your impudence and take your coming here as a joke—that's what you mean. Now, so far as I understand matters, you have got the better of Mr. Vanbrugh, or his friends, of several hundred pounds, and now you

come here willing to let bygones be bygones. Is that it?"

"That is it."

"And a very nice person you are to propose such a course. May I ask you if the repayment of the money is to enter at all into the question?"

"No, Mr. Shorter, it is not."

"Then what is the nature of the bargain, pray?"

"Simply if he will let me alone I'll promise to let him alone," was the visitor's reply.

Mr. Shorter looked before him in amazement. "You are a pretty scoundrel to come here with such a proposition."

The visitor shrugged his shoulders, but made no other answer.

"None of your confounded French gestures here, for there is no chance of

my mistaking you for a nobleman. How much money did you run away with?"

"Three hundred pounds."

"For that you would probably get ten years' penal servitude, my man," said Mr. Shorter, with his hands behind him, and raising and lowering his little body on his toes.

"Pardon me, not if Mr. Edward Shorter undertook my defence."

Mr. Shorter laughed again in spite of himself.

"The transaction," resumed the polite visitor, "was a perfectly *bonâ fide* one. I parted with half the property of a magazine for the money. The registered title was alone worth as much, while Mr. Mallelieu had all the kudos of being announced as its editor."

Mr. Shorter soon recovered himself. "And what about that pistol business,

my fine friend? How do you propose to explain that away?"

"It has been on my mind, I regret to say, ever since."

"So I should think. It was accidental, I suppose?" said the barrister, raising his eyebrows.

"Purely."

"Dear me! Now supposing we come to business. You have come here to make an offer to my friend Mr. Vanbrugh. He is absent from town just now, I am sorry to tell you."

"I know it, and that is why I came here to-day. I preferred to see you in this matter rather than Mr. Vanbrugh."

"I have no doubt you did. Perhaps you know where he has gone?"

"I do; into Kent, to look after Job Hollings."

"I commend you for your knowledge,

but still I can give no hope about concluding this bargain you talk of. As, moreover, I am very busy, I must bid you 'Good morning' at once; and take my advice not to come here again. Another time I may have a clearer recollection of whom you are than I have now."

"Very good; only I hope you will not forget to mention to Mr. Vanbrugh that I really did call to express my willingness to desist troubling him, provided he gives his word of honour not to pursue me any further. I should have thought he had suffered enough by this time."

"Why, what on earth do you mean, man?" It was seldom the barrister could not fathom a client of his, but he certainly did not understand what our old friend De Belleville was now talking about.

"Well, Mr. Shorter, I know both Mr. Vanbrugh and yourself are very clever men; but the mouse, in its humble way, can do sometimes as much as a lion, or even two. I am but the thieving mouse, if you like, and, being the more modest animal, come to make terms, but I have done a good deal of domestic mischief for all that. Will you call off the cats?"

All through the interview the American-looking stranger had remained, modestly, wideawake in hand, near the door. He scarcely raised his eyes when he spoke; he had no desire to hoodwink the barrister, being aware that any pains he might take would be thrown away on Mr. Shorter. At the same time he desired to show he was a man of resource and determination, and in concluding his last speech spoke quicker and sharper than he had done before.

"I should have done much better," said the barrister, impressively, "to have followed my first inclination and kicked you out of that door. Had I been wise, I should have done so. Now, if you have nothing more to say, perhaps you will go. You have my decision."

"I have yours, sir, but not Mr. Vanbrugh's. I have made his life miserable for him during the past three months; will you ask him, please, if it is to go on? I had half-a-dozen different means at my disposal to injure him; he may thank Providence I did not employ a more serious one."

"What do you mean, you scoundrel?" cried the barrister, springing forward and getting between his visitor and the door. "What is it you have done? You shall not stir from here till you have made a clean breast of it all,—do you hear?"

Mr. Edward Shorter flung off his coat, the better to enforce physical measures, and then stood with his back to the door, defying his companion.

"I shall be very happy to explain. I came here for no other reason, only you would not listen. Mr. Vanbrugh has led a very unhappy life since Christmas last, and I am the cause of it. He challenged me and I accepted the challenge."

"You miserable being!"

"The quarrel was not of my seeking. He played a game last summer, and lost; ever since then he has threatened me; this has been my reply."

"And you have the audacity to come here?"

"Yes, to beg that hostilities may cease. To show how much in earnest I am, I will frankly confess that it was I who forged that letter of Lucy Medli-

cott's addressed to Job Hollings. I knew the keenest way of striking Mr. Vanbrugh was through the man Hollings, and there were several plans that suggested themselves to me, made possible, by the way, through the assistance of your clerk Whiffler. It is enough that I chose the form of a love-letter. The thing was so easy of accomplishment, and the tools were so ready to my hand, that I might have been tempted to do it for the mere sake of mischief. As you and Mr. Vanbrugh continued to hound me down by detectives, I had little scruple. The affair was simple to a degree. I possessed a dozen specimens of Miss Lucy's handwriting, and I knew I might calculate on Mallelieu's cantankerous disposition to set fire to the train. I simply put the letter into an envelope and sent it to my good friend Mallelieu. How

well the experiment succeeded, Mr. George Vanbrugh alone can tell."

"You infamous impostor!" was all Mr. Shorter could say.

"Will you call the cats off?" asked the visitor.

The barrister went slowly across the room and picked up his coat. He was thinking what he should say, but he had brushed the coat and put it on before a satisfactory solution of the affair presented itself to his mind.

"Go, and don't let me see you here again."

"Is it war or is it peace—what do you say?"

"I shall say nothing," said Shorter, firmly.

"And I," said the other, as he departed, "shall take silence for consent."

CHAPTER X.

GEORGE VANBRUGH'S CLAIMS ARE ADVOCATED TO SOME PURPOSE.

It was well for the Vicomte de Belleville he did not tarry long after making such a frank avowal of his *finesse*, for Mr. Shorter's resentment increased rather than abated in considering the matter. The man cunningly enough foresaw that if the letter he had written were discovered to be a forgery, the onus would at once fall upon Ferdinand Mallelieu. How deliberately they had all fallen into the trap, Mr. Shorter himself being one of the first to take the bait, was a

reflection the barrister could not bear with equanimity, and if his visitor had not rapidly disappeared there would have been a different ending of the interview.

Even the big official letter lying on the table lost its influence upon the barrister, for he thrust it moodily into his pocket without even looking again at the contents. To find himself and his friends overreached by an adventurer who came to dictate his own terms, to be bearded in his rooms by one of a class whose destinies he ruled and whose liberties he controlled, by a man who had grovelled to him in the dock—as Mr. Shorter put it—"it was degrading."

"And to make me waste my time here into the bargain, confound the fellow!" cried the irascible little barrister, snatching up his hat and papers. "I only wonder now that I didn't half murder him."

Mr. Shorter was much less successful that day in court. His friends thought it was the appointment that upset him, and those who offered their congratulations were surprised at the coolness with which they were received. He defended two prisoners—men who had been convicted of burglary half a dozen times already—and made scarcely a point in their favour. Their chief defence was to the effect that it was a case of mistaken identity, and under ordinary circumstances, Mr. Shorter would have created a strong impression upon a jury who were called upon to convict prisoners simply because they had been convicted before; it is true he went so far as to point out that wrong-doers were entitled to justice just as much as any one else, and that thoughtless juries were in a great measure responsible for

habitual criminals, since they often found a man guilty of one crime because he had committed another; the police, to whose interest it was to secure a conviction, were indeed so alive to this, that they always sought to fasten a crime upon a ticket-of-leave man, because there was less need of proof in his case. In Mr. Shorter's opinion, the fact that a man was well known to the police appeared rather a reason why the jury should demand stronger proof than usual, and hesitate considerably before returning a verdict. The barrister's logic, however, just lacked that sense of earnestness which it usually conveyed, and the jury, instead of hesitating, never left the box at all, the men receiving a sentence of seven years' penal servitude within ten minutes of Mr. Shorter resuming his seat.

"We'd ha' done better without any mortal defence at all; Shorty Ted is a-getting played out," grumbled one of the prisoners as he was removed from the dock—a dictum which their counsel, for the nonce, appeared to concur in.

It was the last case of the sessions, and Mr. Shorter had to shake hands and accept congratulations all round before he was permitted to depart. Sundry glasses of sherry were drunk in his honour, and one wag asked his "l'dship" when the dinner at Richmond to celebrate his elevation was to come off.

The barrister disengaged himself as soon as he could and drove off to his chambers preparatory to calling on his friends at Notting Hill. He rapidly made his toilet, although, from the bad treatment received by various articles of apparel, it was easy to see Mr. Shorter had not yet recovered his good temper.

"The impudent scoundrel!" It was not the prisoner who had passed strictures on the barrister's weak defence, but the French viscount, to whom Mr. Shorter so constantly referred.

Mrs. Mallelieu and Miss Medlicott were both at home when Mr. Shorter called, and they would be happy to see him. He was shown into the drawing-room, where the sisters were seated. It was not Mr. Shorter's habit to beat about the bush, and in five minutes he had communicated the substance of his morning's interview.

"I did not know where George Vanbrugh was, or I need scarcely say I should not have troubled you in this matter. The man seems to have known that George had gone to find Job Hollings, and as there would then be an end, once for all, of this unfortunate

letter, he impudently called on me to boast of his doings," added the barrister.

"But isn't he satisfied with what he has robbed Lucy of already? It is strange he should continue to meddle with our affairs, when he knows we could prosecute him at any time," was Kate's indignant remark.

"When we catch him, we might. But he made quite sure George was not with me when he called, and as he has been a client of mine, I had some silly scruples about detaining him—scruples, however, which would hardly have served him had he stayed very long."

"And he did not stay very long, I suppose?" said Lucy, laughing.

The barrister smiled and shook his head. "The man was more than a match for me, I must confess; he knew precisely how far to go and he went no

further. I have some experience of criminals, but I never was so taken in."

"I am glad to hear it, Mr. Shorter," said Lucy. "You will now have some sympathy for Kate and myself. I only wish George had been taken in too."

Mr. Shorter, for the moment, looked as if he meant to adopt Lucy's sentiment, and express a hope that she might herself have the pleasure of performing this service for her cousin; but the relations between George and Lucy were of too delicate a character to joke upon, so he simply asked where George was.

"At Yalding, on the Medway," said Kate. "He and Mr. Alpha Wright are together and they have found Job; we had a note this morning."

"From Mr. Wright, not from George," put in Lucy.

"It appears Mr. Wright claims the

credit of discovery, and claimed also the right of writing to Lucy. You haven't the letter here, have you, Lucy?" asked Kate.

"No, I haven't," responded Lucy, blushing. "Mr. Wright is a great favourite of mine, you must know, Mr. Shorter."

"The bearer of good news generally is a favourite, Miss Medlicott. I have some for our friend George, and you will be rendering me a service if you convey it to him through the same channel." And then Mr. Shorter told of his good fortune.

The sisters were delighted. "I only wish, Mr. Shorter, that George had followed your example, and taken to the same sort of work," said Kate. "I think he would have succeeded."

"No, he wouldn't, my dear Mrs. Mal-

lelieu. George would never have earned sixpence as a criminal barrister. You must have plenty of assurance, and never feel the slightest compunction about saying spiteful things of people who stand in your way if you are to defend a prisoner successfully. George would be troubled by a lot of principles, which, however much they redound to his credit, would materially interfere with his success as a criminal lawyer."

"Then I am very glad George Vanbrugh had the good sense to abandon such a profession," was Lucy's remark. "Or rather, I ought not to have said that, Mr. Shorter; I mean, of course, that I am glad he abandoned the career rather than his principles, you know," said Lucy, very red and confused.

"You are perfectly right, Miss Medlicott; I quite understand, and am only

too delighted that George has still a champion in you. I am, like yourself, too old a friend of his to speak aught but frankly about him, and I say again he is too good a man to be wasted in the manufacture of an Old Bailey barrister."

Kate and Lucy laughed in spite of themselves; the notion occurred to them that somehow, with all his principles, George Vanbrugh had not made much way in the world, while his whilom partner had managed to secure a firm footing. Probably Mr. Shorter read their thoughts, for he said—

"George has been working lately quite as hard as I ever did, and with a little luck he should soon become a popular composer. Of course I don't mean to say that he has any chance of shining as a Mozart or Mendelssohn, but some of his ballads and serenades

are really good and ought to bring him money. I am not joking, I assure you, Miss Medlicott; but am as frank now as when I said George could not do what I have done at the bar," added Mr. Shorter, for Lucy only laughed the more.

"I beg your pardon, but I was not laughing at what you were saying, Mr. Shorter," said Lucy, reddening.

"No, it was something that Mr. Alpha Wright said in his note this morning," explained Kate. "Mr. Wright was singing George's praises after the same fashion, and he also spoke highly of George's skill as a composer."

Mr. Shorter had left off blushing since he practised at the bar, if he had not done so before, otherwise it would have been his turn to get red and uncomfortable. Instead of this, he rose and

took his leave; however confident he was in the presence of a British jury, that of Kate and Lucy was a little too much for him.

"You will no doubt see George before I shall, Mrs. Mallelieu; but at any rate I thought it my duty to call at once to let you know what this wretched man told me this morning."

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Shorter."

"And so am I," added Lucy; "although you will think me very ungrateful, I know."

Mr. Shorter bowed and nodded, and shook hands, and made good his retreat somehow. He never quite hit it with Lucy Medlicott; whether he praised George Vanbrugh to her or ignored his friend's good qualities it was always the same, he never could please her.

There was enough to worry poor Lucy just then and to account for her strange conduct. Kate accompanied the brisk little man to the door to thank him once more for coming, and then turned to her sister. Lucy was not in tears, but she was too moved to speak.

"Never mind, Trot, darling. If Ferdinand did not write that letter, he was very much to blame for not showing it to you or me. He allowed it to work all possible harm, and never defended you, or allowed you to defend yourself. The trick would have been found out at once if he had not been so malicious."

"If George had only let that dangerous man alone all this would never have happened," was Lucy's plaint.

"I won't have George found fault with, at any rate, Lucy. Do you know I am

beginning to believe we are treating him very badly. Don't you think you could love him, Trot, and make him happy? I do so wish you would." And Kate leaned over and affectionately kissed her sister, as she repeated the last words in a whisper. Lucy's only reply was a shake of the head, as she wiped away the tears that started to her eyes.

But Kate was not to be denied. "He loves you dearly, Trot, and he has done all he can to prove his love. You ought to marry, dearest; you will not wish to live any longer under the same roof with Ferdinand, and to live alone by yourself, even close to us, would be miserable indeed. Do think of it, Trot, to please me as well as George. You would make him so happy; he is good and generous, and if he has faults, who are we to judge

him? Look at his comrades too; would you prefer a man like Edward Shorter or Alpha Wright?"

Lucy shook her head again, but this time laughter came instead of tears.

"But I am speaking seriously, Trot. I know at one time you thought it a sort of duty towards me to refuse him, because long ago there had been a sort of engagement between us."

"It was a true engagement," interrupted Lucy, vehemently.

"A true engagement, if you please, Trot, dear. I was fourteen, and George seventeen; was it likely that a compact between a foolish boy and girl should end otherwise than in folly?"

"George Vanbrugh neglected you, Kate,—you know he did. I was younger and more suited to his taste, and so he decided to leave the elder sister alone.

He grudgingly spared us a day now and then, when his pleasant life in London bored him too much, and no sooner had Ferdinand married you than he began to pester me with attentions." Lucy in her excitement had withdrawn her handkerchief from her face and turned to her sister. "That is the truth, Kate, and you know it."

"That is the truth from our point of view," was Kate's quiet remark.

"And it is the truth as it should be told," pursued Lucy. "I have no objection to George Vanbrugh; I like George Vanbrugh—in a way. But not in a serious light. George never regarded us nor our hopes and prospects in life seriously, and why should we regard his? Why should I marry a man who has made his pleasures the one study of his life, and who, now these pleasures pall

upon him, would wed me simply for a change?"

Kate did not reply except by a gentle caress of her hand.

"You have not been so happy, Kate, in your marriage that I should hurriedly barter my freedom and independence; George has shown more curious whims than ever Ferdinand did before his wedding day, so the kind of life we should lead is no matter for doubt. You cannot urge one single good reason, Kate, why I should marry." Lucy was loud in her defiance; she would have spoken less loudly had she believed more thoroughly in her cause, as Kate knew only too well.

"Yes, Trot, I can; I can give you two good reasons why you should take George Vanbrugh for a husband."

Lucy tightened her lips and turned

her pale face towards her sister, but she mistrusted her voice too much to speak.

"Because you love him, Lucy, and because I love him too. You do not mind paining yourself in following what you consider your duty, but you would not willingly pain me. If you do not marry George Vanbrugh it is because of his supposed ill treatment of me. For my sake then I ask you to forgive and forget his conduct."

Lucy held out no longer. It had been hard work resisting so long. She had argued thus stoutly the more to mask her real feelings, and in the end proved particularly willing to be subdued. A mingling of tears and caresses served better to seal the mutual understanding between the sisters than any other means could have done. Women cannot show

their sympathy more strongly than by weeping together.

"But he may never ask me again," said Lucy presently, brightening up through her tears.

"He would go on asking you for ever, Trot, dear, if you continued to refuse him."

"And that you think is reason enough for not holding out any longer. Oh, Kate!"

"It is a very good one, dear, at any rate; for George, as Mr. Shorter said, has principles, and his principles would never allow him to relinquish a good wife for the want of asking."

Wat came in with a message from the philosopher. Master Ferdy would be glad of the attendance of his mamma or auntie to read him a story. The philosopher was on the sofa now in the

dining-room and rapidly getting well at the prospect of going down into the country once more.

"Dear me, have you left Ferdy all by himself?" asked Lucy.

Ferdy was not by himself, Mr. Wat said; he had left his Punch doll on the philosopher's pillow "a-purpose" that the latter might not feel lonely during the temporary absence of the messenger.

"He has been lying down atween us all the while," explained Mr. Wat, the better to indicate the position of Mr. Punch; "and making us laugh so. What was you crying for?"

Mamma and auntie Loo wanted to explain that they, too, had been happy; and that was why they had been crying; but it was clear Mr. Wat did not believe them. Nor did the philosopher, when

he saw his auntie's red eyes, and repeated the question.

"Why, who has done this?" asked Lucy, anxious to change the subject. There was a tray near the sofa, and on the tray an empty jelly-pot and spoon.

"I done it," said Wat, stoutly.

"'Cos Wat wanted to be ill, like me, and be fed with jelly," explained the philosopher.

"I only p'etended," urged Wat, in extenuation.

"Yes, but you have eaten it all," said Lucy.

"Uncle George gave it him," remarked the philosopher. "The Punch doll is uncle George, and he has been taking care of us."

"Only p'etending," impressed Mr. Wat again.

The mention of uncle George saved

the youngsters a scolding; and Wat was simply enjoined never to pretend to be ill any more, or, at any rate, never to pretend to eat jelly again out of a real pot.

Auntie Loo knew the story-book the children loved best, that of Hans Christian Andersen, and was soon reciting the wonderful adventures of the soldier in 'The Tinder-Box.' The three dogs that always did the bidding of the owner of the tinder-box, and whose eyes were so particularly big and round, were fast favourites with the philosopher and Wat, and the latter spent many of their spare moments in deliberating what they would best like these wonderful dogs to fetch, should the tinder-box ever fall into their hands.

"But it isn't a true story, is it, auntie?" said the philosopher. He

always asked the question at the end, and did it so earnestly, too, that auntie Loo scarcely had the heart to impeach its veracity.

"It might have been true once, at the time when there were fairies and giants and dragons that eat up pretty princesses; but that is long, long ago, if it ever was at all."

"It would be very nice to have some big dogs now to fetch you what you wanted, wouldn't it, auntie?" said the philosopher, rubbing his hands and inwardly rejoicing over the thought.

"Some jelly?" suggested Wat, soliloquizing.

"I wouldn't have jelly, would you, auntie?" said the elder boy.

"No, certainly not," was auntie Loo's reply.

"While I was lying here I would have

the tinder-box by my side, and whenever I wanted to see anybody I would rub it, wouldn't you, auntie?"

Lucy nodded assent.

"And if," added the philosopher, with sparkling eyes, "I wanted to see somebody very, very much, I should rub the box very, very hard, and then the dogs would know they must come quickly, wouldn't they?"

"Some more jelly," suggested Wat; "a very lot."

"No, no," said the philosopher, petulantly, "not jelly at all. I would rub the box very hard, and tell the dogs to fetch me my uncle George and poor Job."

"You would have jelly?" said Wat, appealing from his brother to his aunt.

"No, Wat, dear. I should like to see uncle George and Job best."

CHAPTER XI.

JOB GETS ANOTHER NURSE.

THE cottage where they found Job Hollings was a very poor tenement. There were but two rooms, and the good-natured Kentish woman with her kindly face and round red cheeks had given up one of them to Job. He had lain down on the turf before the little house, as Alpha Wright had done, and gazed at its low red roof and the yellow lichens upon the walls. He had inhaled the sweet odour of the wallflowers and watched the blue smoke curling up into the sky above.

At the invitation of its mistress he, too, had unlatched the gate and gone up the brick-paved path, among the bright marigolds and tulips, and, so it appeared, had leaned against an apple tree by the porch while she brought him a cup of milk.

"He was as white as the milk I fetched him, and turned so faint I could hardly help him indoors," explained the woman. "It's a mercy I was at home, poor fellow!"

The friends glanced at the little woman and then at the patient.

"I thought this gentleman here was going to be as bad," said she, turning to Alpha with a smile. "He was lying down that quiet, I went up to the palings to look."

"It was awfully good of you," replied Alpha, looking at the neatly kept cottage and its laughing mistress; "I almost

wish I was ill, don't you know—only our friend there seems so very bad."

"We cannot thank you enough for what you have done, or repay you, for that's impossible," said George; "but you must let us make all amends in our power for the trouble and expense you have been at with our poor invalid."

"There is no expense, sir, for he has promised to pay my husband for his keep, and as to his lodging, that hasn't cost us nothing. There aren't any children to bother him, so he is as well off here as if he had the room to himself. But he ought to have a doctor, my husband says, and if he is no better to-night when Sam comes home we shall get one fetched." The woman made the last announcement in a firm voice with her arms akimbo, as if she rather expected the invalid to protest.

George took Alpha Wright to the door in consultation.

"What do you think, Alpha, about having him moved?"

"Certainly not, Vanbrugh. Are you mad? Why, he couldn't be better off; and with such an awfully jolly nurse, too."

"Only we must remember we are taxing these poor people. It may be all very well for us and for the invalid, but we must mind how we trespass on a stranger's good nature. At any rate, we will ask her to keep him till to-morrow, when we have heard the doctor's opinion." And George forthwith made the appeal.

"Lord bless you, sir, he may remain as long as he likes. As I said, he aren't no burden to us."

"Ah, but that won't do. Even if your good nature permitted such a thing,

your husband might not like it," said George.

"Oh, Sam don't mind, sir."

"Then you and Sam are two deuced good-natured, soft-hearted sort of people, don't you know," blurted out Mr. Wright, quite unable to control his feelings.

The woman's face beamed with pleasure. "This gentleman here made me laugh as soon as ever I spoke to him, sir," she said to George. "He is a merry one when he is at home, I know."

Meanwhile Job Hollings had never uttered a word. George had grasped his hand on entering, but the invalid was either unwilling or unable to take part in the conversation. Now, however, he asked his nurse for something to drink, and as she gave it to him he said, "I don't want to go from here. I'll pay you, never fear."

"I know you will, deary. You shall stop, if you want to. They shan't take you away."

"You'll tell Sam, won't you?" said Hollings.

"Oh, yes, I'll tell Sam; but you shan't go away if you don't like," she said, nodding her head in a determined fashion.

"I never want to go back to London any more—never any more." Poor Job trembled violently as he spoke.

He would have relapsed again within himself had not the woman touched his arm. "This gentleman wants to talk to you," she said, pointing to George. "I'll only go as far as the garden, and I can hear if you call."

Job looked nervously after his benefactress, but was considerably relieved when he saw Mr. Wright follow the woman out

of doors and leave him alone with George Vanbrugh.

George put a hand upon the sick man's shoulder as he said, slowly, "Job, my poor fellow, you must forgive me. It is I who have driven you from home, from your friends, from all that is dear to you. I was a brute to let you go away that afternoon. I behaved meanly and selfishly, and I haven't a word to offer in excuse. Only let me nurse you as I did before, and I shall know that you do not altogether despise me."

Job Hollings shook his head dolefully, and two big tears rolled down the sallow cheeks.

"Come, come, Job, you must get well soon, for Lucy Medlicott wants to see you very much; she sent me to find you and to bring you back."

"Never any more—never any more!"

faltered Job, repeating the words he had said before.

"Well, well, you shan't go back, my good fellow; but you must get well as soon as you can for your friends' sake, if not for your own."

Job looked straight in front of him; the tears still streamed from his eyes, but his voice was firmer than before. "I have no friends, and I want none."

"No friends, Job!"

"None. It is my own fault, and I make no complaint. I never made a friend in my life that I did not afterwards lose. My friends are the open country and the wayside flowers; they are the only true friends I have known. You would not be so cruel as to take me back to London and rob me of them?"

"No, Job."

"They are the only things that have

smiled on me in my lifetime, that have given me pleasure, that have made life worth living for. I have toiled and worked in London many a day, in the choking fog and evil-smelling vapour, with nothing but grimy roofs and the soot-beaten walls to look upon, sustained by the thought that I should soon be walking in the green meadows and sunshine again, by the fresh hedgerows and bowery lanes. When I shut my eyes at night," continued Job, grasping the wooden settle with his hands, "my pleasantest dreams are of the country. I wander through moss-grown vales, where crimson foxgloves nod, and blue aconite and yellow heartsease mingle with the soft green, where the fragrant breath of the meadowsweet lingers in the warm air. Friends!—there can be no better friends than these; there have been none half so true to me."

George did not interrupt; he had nothing to say.

"Only those who know the flowers as I do can tell of their friendship. It never changes, it is always the same," said the sick man. "They have been my companions my whole life through. I have walked day after day in no other company. Their bright faces smile; they tell me their names; they whisper to me in fragrance. Year after year they meet me at old familiar places; in sunshine or shade they never fail; they never grow old; they never fall away. Mr. Vanbrugh, if you still have any regard for me, and I know you have, let me remain here in peace."

"My good Job, you shall remain here if you wish; but you would not have me leave you alone, sick and ill as you are, in a strange house?"

Job Hollings moved uneasily in his seat. George's arguments worried him. "I must be here in the open country, Mr. Vanbrugh. I should be stifled in a close room. Even now I feel sometimes as if I am choking, and they take me to the door to breathe. I must have air and light or I shall be suffocated."

Job Hollings's scared look and staring eyes were still more painful than his speech, and George hesitated to say another word. He would wait for the doctor's opinion before he ventured further with his remonstrances.

"It shall be just as you like, Job. You are in good hands here, and I leave you with a light heart. But you must let me come to see you in the morning."

"Then you will not go away from here?" said Job, still pettishly.

"Not till to-morrow, Job, at any rate.

You cannot expect me to do that. What could I say to Miss Medlicott when she learnt I ran away as soon as I had found you?"

Alpha Wright, much as he tried to do so, could keep the mistress no longer from her charge; it was fortunate, indeed, George Vanbrugh had said his say, for she at once closed the interview, and intimated that if her visitors were really friends they could not show their friendship better than by parting company.

"You remember Mr. Wright, Job?" said George, as cheerfully as he could. "You must get better soon for his sake. He wants to learn all about botany from you. I told him how you were my instructor and what a dullard I was."

Job smiled faintly as he looked up.

"You'll find him a better pupil than I was, Job, and much quicker."

"And he'll make you laugh, too, sir, I know; and that is the best way to get well. How he has been making fun of me, to be sure."

"I would do anything I could to make you better, if I only knew how," said Alpha. "You smoke, I know, Mr. Hollings; I wish you would try one of my cigars."

"No, sir, I can't smoke. Ever since I left town I have not touched a pipe; the smoke chokes me. But I smell the flowers all the better for it."

Vanbrugh and Wright shook hands with the patient and took their departure. There was no help for it. George would willingly have remained, but he saw Job was restless to a degree as long as they were present. They asked the woman to let them out of the gate, so as to get a few words with her.

"I'll come if you like, but I should have thought you were big enough to open it for yourselves," said she, laughing at them.

They asked where they could sleep at Yalding, and made her promise to send Sam round to them, and the doctor too, if it were possible. George would be responsible for any expense, he said, if she would only take good care of the poor fellow.

"Don't you fear, gentlemen; I'll do everything, you may be sure of that. I'll see he wants for nothing. But don't you be coming round again unless he wants it. It only worrits him, as you see."

The brisk little woman closed the gate upon her visitors and ran back into the house, lest they should detain her longer.

"Poor Job! I didn't think he would

have taken it so much to heart," said George. "We had a row at my rooms, you must know, and then—then he went off. I would give a good deal now to recall my words."

Both Sam and the doctor favoured the friends with a visit. Sam was smaller and brisker even than his wife, and was exceedingly proud of the fact that she had shown such discretion in succouring the sick man. He had felt sure it was a case for the doctor, and he was right glad he carried out his idea and fetched the medical man, as he intended.

The doctor pronounced the illness the result of extreme heat and cold. The man had been constantly walking in the sun during a few days of hot weather, and for three whole nights remained out in the open fields. It was a wonder he was alive. The choking the man com-

plained of was due to a sharp attack of bronchitis.

The doctor was of opinion that Job could not be moved just then, and Sam added a still more emphatic dictum. Moreover, the wife had enjoined Sam to say that the gentlemen weren't to worry themselves, for she could do all the nursing that was necessary.

"And you, gentlemen, aren't to come unless she sends for you, mind. He is always a-thinking you want to get him away, and the missis is continually pacifying him. So you mayn't come, remember, for the missis have given her word upon it."

There was nothing for it but to obey the cottager's directions, and George Vanbrugh and Mr. Wright had to fill up their time as they best could. The next day passed, and the next. The

doctor reported an improvement in Job's health, but he was still restless at the thought of Vanbrugh being in the neighbourhood. The invalid had questioned his nurse on the subject, and she frankly admitted that his friends were in the village. If they continued to remain the doctor feared his patient might give him the slip and endeavour to leave the cottage, so chafed was he at the idea of being watched and guarded.

George knew not how to act. Instead of aiding in Job's convalescence he was retarding it. He felt half inclined to see Job once more, and to beg permission at least to sit and talk with him. But what were they to chat about? Job had one favourite topic, but that one was the subject of their quarrel—Lucy Medlicott.

For the same reason he could hardly

suggest that Lucy should journey down to see poor Job. Lucy would not hesitate, were she asked, he knew well enough; but the embarrassment that would be felt both by Job and herself would be as harmful as George's own presence was. Quiet and repose were no doubt very necessary to the patient, but these would hardly remove the despondency into which Job had fallen. To win him back to his own cheerful mood, influence of some kind must be employed.

Presently George conceived an idea. He would act upon it at once. He made known to Wright his determination to go back to town—a decision the latter received with considerable fortitude. Alpha had been fishing in the Medway for the past two days and had no luck.

"I'll tell you what, if you are coming back here, Vanbrugh, I dare say you could get Danford to join you. I'll tell him. Danford would like it, I know, above all things; he would go anywhere for a fish. I am not cut out for that sort of thing, don't you know; it is not exciting enough."

"Thank you, Alpha, but I have already fixed on a companion, and it is to fetch him that I want to run up to town," said George. "I am afraid it has not been a lively time for you, but at any rate you have the satisfaction of knowing that you found Job for us. You had better go up to Notting Hill and receive the ladies' thanks for your services."

"Eh? do you think you would, Vanbrugh? They are awfully nice girls, and I have a good mind. They wouldn't

laugh at a fellow, I suppose," added Mr. Wright, as his previous visits broke upon his mind.

"They would be very ungrateful if they did, Alpha."

George reported their going away at the cottage, and did not ask to see Job again. The little woman, who had been rather impatient over their frequent visits, grew amiable once more on learning she was not to be troubled with them any longer. Their absence would be the best medicine the patient could have, she plainly told the two gentlemen.

Job had all along refused to go to bed. In the first place he wanted to go to the door now and then and feel the cool air against his face, and for this reason would not put off his clothes; nor could he lie down for the choking sensation in his throat. So they made up a couch for

him where he could rest in a sitting posture.

Propped up in this fashion day and night, Job Hollings found the time pass slowly and drearily enough. Sam and his wife were unremitting in their attentions, but the good people could not be always with him, and, besides, it was hard work being merry with Job's sad face before them. For all his nurse's brightness and smiling ways the tears would come flowing down Job's sallow cheek as he sat there hour after hour —tears that came faster than the little woman could remove them with that big blue handkerchief of his.

The night was worst of all, for the darkness was stifling to the patient. Fortunately, they were the short summer nights, and with the bright dawn came relief and less sense of oppression.

Job awaited patiently the return of day. He could then sleep without dread of suffocation.

There was no one in the cottage when he awoke. He turned his head to look about him, but neither Sam nor his good wife were visible. Had they left him alone? No; somebody was there, for he felt a warm hand placed upon his, a tiny hand, with long thin fingers.

"Are you better, Mr. Hollings?"

Job considered for a moment. Where did the small voice come from, and how did its owner get there?

"I have been waiting, oh, such a long time for you to wake. You are very ill, Mr. Hollings, and I have come to nurse you. You said I might, you know, so you musn't send me away."

Job considered again. "Poor little chap!" he said.

"You are more ill than I was," said the little philosopher. "But I am glad of it for one thing, because I can take care of you so nicely."

"Did you come here on purpose?"

"Of course I did, Job. It was a bargain we made," said the boy.

Job spoke no more for some moments. Then he turned to his attendant, and asked, as firmly as the tears would let him, who had brought him there.

"My uncle George, Job," responded the little lad; "and he wants you to forgive him. You will, won't you, Job?"

CHAPTER XII.

"A SOUND, FULL-BODIED WINE OF PURE VINTAGE."

THE little philosopher held Job's hand fast in his warm fingers as he told the patient how he never, never meant to leave any more until Job was well and strong again. Wat was coming, too, and would bring with him a lot of toys, so they could be as happy as the day was long.

Before the toys arrived, however, Job's spirits had risen wonderfully. The red-cheeked hostess was quite startled at the change, for since Ferdy's coming the sick

man had not once given way to tears. Job's time was too much taken up to brood over misfortunes, for the small nurse was full of anecdote and recital, and, more than everything, discussed with Job the flower-world with all the serious interest of a botanist.

"I am so glad you are ill in the country, Job, because I can bring flowers to you and you can tell me all about them. You know the names of all the flowers in the world, don't you, Job?"

"Oh, no; only a few of them."

"But all that live about here, you do —in Kent. Auntie Loo told me so."

Job said he knew most of the Kentish flowers, but so did aunt Lucy. Whenever Job had found a rare flower on his walks he always used to take it to Miss Medlicott, he explained to the philosopher.

"Yes, I know. Auntie Loo and I often talk about you. You remember Diamond, auntie Loo's shaggy pony, don't you, Job?"

"Yes."

"Well, he is coming to see you, he is. 'Cos we want to take you for a drive. We can go out together, then—the pony and you and I."

If the small nurse had not secured such a firm hold of his patient the latter might possibly have mutinied. But Ferdy was inflexible; and when the pony-chaise came Job did not hesitate a moment about driving in it with his young friend. In fact, Job never questioned the philosopher's reasoning. The latter was so earnest and matter-of-fact in his dealings, that the patient, if he was amused at times, never dreamed of opposition.

If it was George who accompanied the

philosopher to Yalding, he never made his appearance at the cottage. Indeed, Vanbrugh could have waited only to see the new nurse duly installed, for he was in London again on the Sunday following, doing duty as usual at Brompton New Church. He was still organist at that edifice, but it was not this alone that demanded his presence in town. There was a message from Shorter, who had been negotiating the sale of some "Summer Songs" by George Vanbrugh. A publisher had offered the sum demanded by Mr. Shorter, but on the condition that Mr. Vanbrugh would compose six others, to words supplied by the publisher, on the same terms, should the latter call upon the composer to do so.

"Why, of course I will, Ned. I hope you told the fellow so."

"I told him no such thing," returned

Mr. Shorter. "I said I knew Mr. Vanbrugh's engagements, and I was quite sure they would permit him to do nothing of the sort. I suggested he should ask you to do four only, and give you a year's grace. Your time was fully occupied already."

"What with, I should like to know?" asked George.

"Oh, I can't say. You may have other things to do—get married, perhaps."

"Rubbish!"

"Your songs are, I admit; but still, if the man chooses to part with his money, it is no business of ours. What do you say? I must know your decision at once, as I have to telegraph to Venice."

"Say 'Yes,' of course," said George, in ecstasy. "But why telegraph? Is he in Italy?"

"No, he isn't; but you are—drawing

inspirations under a classic sky. Now that's off my hands, I want you to come to Bow Street with me and see one of your friends," said the active barrister.

"To Bow Street!"

"Yes. I am specially retained to defend Mr. Alpha Wright. Got into trouble at Evans's, it seems. I suppose he bored himself to death with you in the country, and must needs go skylarking about as soon as he returned. He would have been locked up over Sunday if I hadn't found bail. Danford is out of town, but I have telegraphed him to come as a witness. His solemn face and position in the Foreign Office will go a good way, and Mr. Vanbrugh, the well-known organist and composer, will add further respectability. Wright has a cousin married to a baronet, he tells me, and if I wanted a nob I could have him.

But baronets are played out, and magistrates don't believe in them as they used. I 'll risk it with you two."

"Thank you, Ned. But I don't quite see how your witnesses are to help you if they saw nothing of the row."

"They would have been of less help if they had seen it, I suspect," was Mr. Shorter's opinion. "You have supped at Evans's, I suppose; and you know that every now and then they have a vexatious habit of doubling the entrance fee, don't you?"

"Well, yes, at Cattle Show time, and——"

"Never mind the time; I didn't ask you the time, sir," cried Mr. Shorter, snappishly, as he was wont to do in cross-examination. "I shall want to show the provocation that my client received, George, and this is all there appears to have been."

It was impossible for Mr. Wright to get off without a fine of some sort, but Mr. Shorter's assistance was necessary in case the magistrate might forget himself and suggest the admission of the accused into one of Her Majesty's gaols for a little while. Mr. Wright had indulged in a scuffle with the money-taker, it seemed. The latter's habitation was a hollow or recess in the wall, shut in by a door in front. You paid your money through an aperture in this door, and took your ticket for the supper-rooms. Some altercation had taken place between Mr. Wright and the money-taker in this box. Mr. Wright had made an impolitic observation touching the price of admission, and the money-taker retorted. The little gentleman grew irate at the remarks addressed to him, and proposed then and there to pull his adver-

sary's nose, and the other, lulled by a sense of the security of his retreat, expressed a desire "to see him do it." The dispute waxed warm on both sides, when Mr. Wright, perceiving that the door of the pay-box was not perfectly closed, dexterously threw it open and dragged his enemy from the little cavern in which he lived. The result was a general scrimmage, a torn dress-coat, and two wounded waiters.

Mr. Shorter, on behalf of his client, would not demean himself for one instant by seeking to deny the assault. He admitted it in every way; only not, of course, to the absurd extent to which the poor waiters had borne testimony. But the gross provocation received by his client (a gentleman of spotless reputation, with troops of intellectual friends—Mr. Shorter dwelt strongly upon the intellect

of the friends—among whom were to be found diplomatists and composers of the highest rank) was beyond question. A gentleman who consorted with men of refined culture must himself be refined, and less calculated than others to brook a coarse insult. It was no wonder, then, that his client's nature revolted at the treatment he received, and that he retorted with more force than discretion. This did not excuse the assault, however, and Mr. Shorter would not insult the magistrate by bringing it forward in that light. His client must stand by his conduct, and was, in fact, ready to do so; nay, more, he would willingly bear the whole expense of the damage incurred if the money-taker would but express contrition for the rudeness of which he had been guilty.

The magistrate intimated that the

damage must be paid for, as a matter of course, and rather ridiculed Mr. Shorter's notion about any expression of regret being exacted from the money-taker, who was not before the magistrate on any charge. This, in due course, led to a good deal of argument, in which Mr. Shorter took part with much earnestness and display of erudition, although the discussion seemed to have little bearing on the case. The end of it was that Mr. Wright received change out of a five-pound note from a police-sergeant in the office adjoining, and, in newspaper parlance, "left the court with his friends."

They adjourned to the prisoner's private residence, Mr. Wright in a very excited state, and the diplomatist rather low at the thought that his name might get into the papers.

"Here's Danford afraid of getting

wigged at the office," cried Alpha. "Never mind, I'll come and help you out, Dan, my boy, when you get into trouble. You don't know how jolly the thing is; it's the cheapest excitement I know. It's awfully rum, though, paying down your coin and getting the exact change out. Like taking a ticket to Bow Street and back, don't you know. The sergeant laughed, too, as much as I did. 'What is it?' he asked. 'One money-taker and two waiters smashed,' I said. 'How much?'" Mr. Wright enjoyed his joke exceedingly.

"More exciting than fishing in the Medway, eh, Alpha?" said George Vanbrugh.

"Yes; or hearing you strum an old piano in a pot-house parlour, my friend," replied Mr. Wright.

There was no keeping Mr. Wright's

spirits under control now he was once more out of the clutches of the law. He joked his friends all round on their "intellect," and followed up the sally by a well-directed aim at Mr. Danford's red whiskers with a jet of soda-water.

"Be quiet, Alpha, do," cried the diplomatist. "It will take all the colour out of your furniture, and you have spoilt my shirt-front. I wish you would be quiet. I haven't got an aunt who is just dead and left me a lot of money, remember."

"Oh, that's it, is it," said George, who was dispensing sherry to mix with the soda-water.

"Yes," returned Danford. "Didn't you know? All this breaking open of pay-boxes and smashing of waiters is simply because his aunt is dead."

"Well, a fellow must let out somehow. If you had been sat upon all your life

you would be pretty elastic when the weight was taken off, I know."

"I know one thing," said George Vanbrugh, looking up, "and that is, now Mr. Wright is a man of property he will have to give up his naughty ways. You will find mammas look uncommonly sharp after their daughters now, Alpha, and you won't be able to carry on any more flirtations without declaring your intentions, my boy. I am sorry that your fun is at an end, but it's a fact—ask Danford."

Danford promptly concurred, as he went on removing the traces of soda-water from his coat.

"Then I'll tell you what, I'll halve the money between you two fellows," said Alpha, with mock gravity.

"Any way," said Danford, as soon as they had done laughing, "you should

get something to do and employ yourself usefully."

"Like you do, eh, Danford? You are awfully clever, aren't you, and Vanbrugh, too. Shall I blow the organ for you, George, or mend Danford's quills?"

Wright was evidently nettled, so the staider men held their peace.

"Well, as you have dropped giving advice, I don't mind telling you what I really do mean to do," spoke Mr. Wright, in a more serious vein. "If it isn't anything very grand, it is better than devoting your life to writing despatches in bad French, or tuning a piano all day long. I have had the management of a Wine-growers' Association offered to me."

"Not in Spain—I wish it was," continued Mr. Wright, enlarging on the subject, since Danford and Vanbrugh remained silent. "It is a place near

Macon, where they grow capital burgundy, and I can live either there or in Paris. You shall try some of the wine they have sent me. I got tasting it on Saturday night, and that made me so merry."

"But do you know anything about wine?" asked Danford.

"As much as you do about diplomacy, I dare say. You don't suppose I mean to go pottering about the vineyards, do you? The chaps in blue blouses do that. My uncle made his money by brewing, though he never could be prevailed upon to taste his own beer, he was so sure it would disagree with him. So long as his brewery paid he bothered himself very little about the brew. I mean to do the same if I go in for this thingamygig association."

"They won't let you in for nothing, I suppose?" hazarded George.

"Of course they won't. But do you think I am such a fool as to part with my money before I have found out whether the affair is a sound one or not?"

"I don't know," said George, regardless of the consequences.

"Well, then, I'm not," returned Alpha, with decision. "If you want to know, I need not purchase into the concern until I have been a twelvemonth at my post, and then I may take it or leave it."

"All right, my dear fellow; I am glad of it," was George's soothing observation. "Let us taste your wine, by all means, and we will soon give you an opinion upon it."

Mr. Wright quickly recovered his good temper, and went off to fetch the burgundy. The bottles were neatly fitted with bronze capsules, that were exhibited

with no little pride, and the corks gave expression to a loud pop when Alpha drew them—unmistakable proof, as he pointed out, of good bottling.

The burgundy was pronounced on all hands to be very good. As the would-be wine-grower said in measured terms, it was "a sound, full-bodied wine of pure vintage"—a sentiment in which his friends concurred.

The sherry-and-water was discarded altogether, and another bottle of burgundy opened. The trio sat and sipped the generous red liquor, and through its mediation soon became the best of friends again.

"You fellows must give me my first order, don't you know, and write me a testimonial, and all that sort of thing," said Mr. Wright. He had already embarked in the undertaking, and was

mentally doing a thriving business. "And you will have to come over to my château, as they call those white-washed villa places with green shutters."

"It is an uncommonly fine burgundy, Alpha, and no mistake," was George Vanbrugh's opinion.

"Well, then, have some. Let me put you down for a pipe or a cask, or whatever they put it into. You leave it to me," said the ardent business-man.

"Ah, but what's the figure?" said George, shaking his head and helping himself to another glass.

"Nothing, a mere nothing, I assure you, Vanbrugh. The fellow I know, he told me it didn't much matter whether I drank the stuff or not, as it was what they called ordinary macon, a few shillings a dozen. By the way, just let me have Shorter's private address; I'll send

him a drop, for he spoke up for me extremely well. Here's his jolly good health, and I am glad he is getting on so well."

"And we'll drink to the new manager of the Wine Association," cried George.

"Hear, hear!" said Danford.

The toasts were drunk, and several others into the bargain, amid a good deal of merriment and noise, until at last, during a short lull, Danford expressed a belief that there was somebody knocking at the door.

"Is there?" said the noisy host, getting up; "then, why on earth doesn't he come in?"

Alpha Wright, however, was profound in his apologies when he found out who it was. He begged of the visitor to approach and make no ceremony. It was but a few friends, he assured him, and

they were only that moment talking of him; in fact, it was his wine upon which they were making merry.

Vanbrugh and Danford rose, glasses in hand, to receive the new-comer, but he never came nearer than the doorway. Mr. Wright saw his new friend bow and hesitate on the threshold, and saw, too, at the same moment George Vanbrugh's glass of claret dart swiftly at the intruder's head. Before the host could utter a word, the agent of the Wine-growers' Association had fled downstairs and away.

"By Jove, I hope we are not poisoned!" said George, as white as a ghost, and looking queerly at his friends and at the wine.

Danford stood stock still. Wright went out silently to look over the balustrades after the vanished one, and now as

silently returned. They gazed at George's pale face, and awaited his explanation.

"Was he the fellow who brought this wine?"

Alpha nodded.

"And wants you to go in for this business?"

Again Alpha answered in dumb show.

"Why, he is the scoundrel who swindled my cousin out of her money and shot Job Hollings."

Alpha Wright opened his mouth, but he said nothing.

"If you want to know more about him, ask Shorter. He meant to poison me once with some of Hollings's stuff, so that poor Job might be suspected of it. He did, I tell you."

Poor Wright again turned to the door through which the man had departed, but still said nothing.

"I don't think I would go in for wine-growing, if I were you," suggested Danford.

Alpha Wright returned to the door and shut it. "No, I won't," he said.

"You will leave the white-washed château with its green shutters for somebody else, eh, Alpha?" said George. "It was in Spain, after all."

"Yes; but we won't leave this wine, don't you know," cried Mr. Wright, plucking up. "I have got the best of the bargain after all, I think."

"We may as well finish it, as we have begun," said Danford, smiling.

"It certainly is an uncommonly fine burgundy," said George, yielding.

"A sound, full-bodied wine of pure vintage," cried Alpha, as merrily as before.

Ten minutes afterwards they had forgotten the little adventure.

CHAPTER XIII.

GOING HOME.

"THERE'S home!—there's home!" shouted the philosopher, frantic with delight.

Wat had more difficulty in recognizing the low, white house among the green trees. "Our home?" he asked of Job who sat propped up in the pony-chaise beside him.

Mrs. Mallelieu and Lucy had overcome Job's dislike to be removed from Yalding in a very simple way. They did everything through Job's little nurse, and it was for his convenience, and not Job's, that the move to Lanthradyne was pro-

posed. The buxom Kentish woman with red cheeks had been won over, too, and, despite Sam's disconsolate look, went off with the cavalcade to continue her kindly services. A dog-cart and the pony-chaise sufficed for the conveyance of all, and the journey was made as leisurely as possible, so as not to distress the invalid.

Wat and the philosopher were in and out of the chaise all day long, as they gathered bunches of drooping flowers by the roadside, or under the directions of Job grubbed up a root here and there, to be put in a brown paper bag for planting at Lanthradyne. It was a glorious ride, by hop-gardens just beginning to green, and bowery woods whose leafy verdure was of the freshest and brightest. The boughs stretched their long arms over the roadway, so that the boys could pluck at the green drapery as they passed; but

what gave rise to more merriment still were the big ruts, which always seemed deepest where the lane was greenest, and jolted and shook the little chaise till patient and nurses laughed again. The shaggy pony bumped them on purpose, the lads declared, for making him work so hard.

As they neared the Dalebrook hills the pony's work became harder still. But Diamond took his time about it. He paused just when and where he pleased, and jerked the reins and shook his head whenever they laughed at him. Ridge behind ridge, clothed in black firs and yellow-green oak, appeared before them, with verdant pasture-land as soft as velvet. In the foreground was a slope of green park land, with its stately trees, half in shadow, half in shine, stretching down hill to a brook, where the russet

cattle stood drinking. On the hill-side beyond, green corn and red clover were lit up by the sun, while straight in front, down in the hollow, was Dalebrook village, or, at any rate, its church spire and big hostelry and signboard, standing at the bottom of the steep white road.

The room he had once before occupied at Lanthradyne was made ready to receive Job—the bright airy room, with snow-white hangings and the well-remembered plants in the window. There was but one person waiting to welcome him, and that was Lucy, and even she remained only long enough to see the patient comfortably located in his apartment, leaving him to the attention of Ferdy and his Yalding hostess. They feared poor Job might be frightened by too much attention.

This mode of action turned out a wise one. Gradually the patient became less restless and peevish, and, left to his own devices, began to be himself once again. The philosopher, instead of proposing fresh subjects for discussion and propounding unceasing questions, came in his turn to be questioned, and this was undeniable proof of an improvement of health.

But his strength did not permit Job to go out of doors. He sat by the open window the live-long day, looking over the green fields. Even on his bed, propped up in a sitting posture—for he still refused to lie down for fear of choking—he could gaze out upon the trees and the meadow-land. Sometimes the idea haunted him that he was back in the close London streets, with the thick fog and sooty sky above him, and then

it was that the green prospect in front came to break the cruel spell.

"I know what you want, Job," said the lad, one morning when he saw his patient more cheerful than usual. "You want to smoke your pipe."

"No, sir, I don't," returned Job, smiling the more.

"But you will have it now I have filled it for you, won't you? See, here it is."

Job looked round at the youngster, and there sure enough was the old black pipe ready filled for smoking.

Job shook his head. "No, it is not that; but I do want something. I want to see Miss Lucy, to thank her for all she has done for me."

"I'll tell her," cried the philosopher, jumping up. "She said I was to call her immediately you asked."

The philosopher ran off on his errand,

and presently returned with auntie Loo. Job's eyes were swimming with tears, and it was with difficulty he could murmur his thanks as he grasped the hand she held out to him.

"Ferdy ran away before I could stop him," said Job, "or I would not have——"

"Nonsense, Mr. Hollings. I told Ferdy I should not come till you were getting stronger, for I should have to scold you very much."

Job smiled feebly.

"I am in earnest, Mr. Hollings. You are a good-for-nothing man to get ill and run away from us all. Mrs. Mallelieu means to give you a talking to as well. You put us under a deep obligation, and when there is an opportunity of repaying it you run off and refuse to let us help you. I am quite ashamed of you."

"May heaven bless your good heart, Miss Medlicott. It is well to be sick sometimes to find out how much goodness there is in the world. I shall never believe in bad people again, everybody has been so kind to me."

"That is simply because you are always ready to help others yourself. But I never thought you were selfish until you went away and left us. Now will you let Mrs. Mallelieu see you," said Lucy, still in pretended anger, "or are you still obdurate?"

"If you please, Miss Lucy, I should like it very much," replied Job, hardly knowing what to say.

The philosopher went off for his mamma, and Lucy sat down beside Job, still retaining the poor fellow's hand in hers as he dozed away in a state of ecstasy.

Notwithstanding Lucy's stout asseverations, Mrs. Mallelieu had no upbraidings to bestow when she came into Job's presence. On the contrary, she approached the poor fellow's couch holding her son's hand and with a face full of sympathy.

"He is not asleep, mother, only thinking," said the nurse, in answer to Kate's warning finger. "He is often like that, and sometimes he tells me what he thinks about. It is very nice, much nicer than what I used to dream in bed. I always had streets and people and yellow and green omnibuses in front of me, and railway trains rushing about and making a noise, but Job never dreams of them. Only when he starts and coughs he sees nasty things, and then we wake him."

The philosopher was right. There was none who understood the man's nature so

well as the little lad who had gained his confidence.

"Only Job can't smoke now, that's the worst of it," continued the philosopher. "He says he don't care, 'cos he can think all about the blue sky and the cowslips and the quiet river moving on through the green fields, just the same as if he were puffing them out of his pipe. But he ought to smoke, and I have filled his pipe for him."

Kate thought Job's unwillingness to smoke might arise from a hesitation to light a pipe indoors, so she, too, urged the request.

"Thank you, m'm; you are all good and kind. But there is no call for a pipe now. In London it was different, for pleasant thoughts only seemed to come when the tobacco smoke had somehow blotted out all around, and you got

into a halo of your own. There is no need to make believe here."

After this Lucy and Kate came and went as they pleased in the sick chamber. Job looked forward to their coming with particular delight, and although he seldom talked with any but the philosopher, the conversations were about little else than his mother and auntie Loo.

"Did you hear some music early this morning, Job, when you woke?"

"Yes, sir."

"And yesterday morning too?"

"Yes," said Job, slowly, thinking the matter out; "yes, and I laid and listened to it yesterday."

The philosopher waited some moments, hoping that his friend would speak again, but was disappointed.

"Do you think you know who played that music, Job?"

"No, sir."

"It was my uncle George that played it."

The sick man turned to his nurse as if he had forgotten something, or had not clearly understood, so the philosopher repeated his observation.

"Mr. Vanbrugh, you mean," said the patient.

"Yes, Job, my uncle, George Vanbrugh."

"I want to see him. Please ask him to come before I forget again; please do."

George was called into Job's room, the invalid awaiting him with outstretched arms and excited to a degree lest George's name should escape memory once more. The men grasped each other's hands fervently.

"You are a cruel fellow, Job, to keep me waiting so long when I wanted to

come and see you. We used to sit together in this very room when I helped to make you well before, and you ought to let me come back. You know very well what a capital nurse I am."

"Oh, yes, I do," said Job, laughing and crying together.

"We were happy enough then, and we will be happy once again if you will only let me stop."

"Everybody is kind to me here, and of course you are, too, Mr. Vanbrugh. It was all your doing bringing me to this nice place, and I ought to have thought of you before. I am very ungrateful."

"No, you are not; it is I who have been jealous and spiteful, Job, and treated you very badly. But you must forget all about that now; besides, you have had your revenge. If you only knew the troubles you brought upon me

in running after you. The beating Mrs. Parkle gave me was of itself quite punishment enough for my conduct.

Job laughed again. "Did you go to see Mrs. Parkle?" he asked.

"Yes, I did, Job, and I shall bear the marks of her talons for some time to come. You used to call her the old she-cat, I remember; but I only thought she showed her claws and did not use them. I know better now. You could have had little regret at parting with such a mistress."

Job shook his head.

"At any rate, I had none, I assure you. I told my friend Mr. Wright of her, and he says he shall not rest till he has had an introduction to Mrs. Parkle. You will have to give it him, Job; I shan't."

"If she had not been so miserly she would have been very well, Mr. Vanbrugh.

You would have said so yourself had you known her better."

"Thank you, Job, but I am quite content as it is; I have no wish to renew the acquaintance. At any rate, I will wait till my wounds have thoroughly healed." George tenderly felt his head and ears in a way that made the invalid quite merry again.

"By the way, I have seen another friend of yours, Job, within the last few days. Perhaps you will say he is a good-hearted soul, too." And George proceeded to tell about the Wine-growers' Association scheme, and how Mr. Alpha Wright had nearly been taken in by the French viscount.

"The affair was capitally planned, though, I must say that," continued George. "Wright showed me a lot of printed documents and cuttings from the

French newspapers, in which M. Latour, as he called himself, was spoken of in high terms. He had printed them on purpose, of course, knowing very well that what people see in print they usually believe. Do you know, I think he must have been a printer, that man, he understood the business so well. Mr. Wright had already engaged to travel with him to Paris, the fellow promising to pay all expenses, and if I had not turned up they would have been on the Continent by this time."

"Well he is a clever man, sir; you must admit that," said Job, wondering over the story.

"That he certainly is, Job, and Mr. Wright was only saying what a splendid diplomatist he would make. He wants my friend Danford to get the man a place in the Foreign Office."

Other friends besides George Vanbrugh and his cousins came to visit Job on his couch. Jordan, the gardener, and the blacksmith from Dalebrook village were admitted by the philosopher in audience. One day Mr. Alpha Wright came down from town especially to shake hands with Job and to have half-an-hour's chat, a sacrifice that was felt the less by the little gentleman, since it gave him an opportunity of renewing his aquaintance with an "awfully jolly girl."

Midsummer-day came and found poor Job still pale and weak. He smiled and shook hands as one or other appeared at his bedside, but he talked less than before. He was still cheerful, and his day-dreams were longer and more pleasant. It was seldom now that the nasty nightmare came, but Job would not lie down for all that; the dread of choking was too great upon him.

Gradually, as if by common consent, a reign of stillness set in. No one moved in the sick chamber, and people came and went on tiptoe. Doors were gently closed, or not closed at all, and the household spoke in whispers. There were children's toys and whips beside Job's bed, but no children came there now. Wat and the philosopher took off their shoes when they climbed the stair, and, hand-in-hand, peeped into the room with tearful eyes. There was but one face that did not look grave in this house of silence, and that was the face of the sick man.

Lucy was the favourite nurse. When she was present the patient had no wants, expressed no desires. A sleepless night brought no complaint, for with early morning came one who, to him, represented all that was lovable on earth.

The midsummer sun shone brightly into Job's room, its rosy hue tinging the white coverlid with golden bars. The lace curtains and snowy hangings grew clearer and whiter as the light flooded into the still chamber, but, in Job's eyes, the sunbeams lit up nothing so lovely as Lucy's face bent over him.

A sob, not of pain but of joy, came from his lips as he said, "All is so bright and beautiful I thought it was a dream, and you an angel watching over me."

Lucy did not speak, but she parted Job's hair from his forehead and kissed it. Then she turned away and softly opened the window.

The sun had risen but an hour, the air was cool and buoyant; it came into the chamber laden with the odour of sun-burnt hay, and in the silence you could hear the haymakers, as they sharpened

their scythes and called blithely to one another. Far away on the blue hills patches of white mist still hovered over the trees, but for the rest, the sky was of the clearest and brightest.

Presently came the lowing sound of cattle. It was milking-time, and the day's work had begun in the cottages. The sun glowed warmer, and the birds twitted and chirruped under the eaves of the roof. So still and clear was the scene that the murmur of bee and insect made music in the air.

From the meadows the sweet air came warmer, bringing with it the odours of wild flowers, the honeyed fragrance of the clover, and the delicate aroma of the lavender fields. Roses sent up their perfume from the garden, and sprays of honeysuckle, as they climbed skyward, carried up with them an atmosphere of sweetness.

Lucy gazed long at the summer scene before her. What was it that caused her to utter that wild cry, and to cast herself, sobbing, on her knees by the bedside?

Job's spirit had fled into the world of flowers he loved so well.

THE END.

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OLD CHARLTON,

BY

H. BADEN PRITCHARD,

AUTHOR OF "DANGERFIELD," "BEAUTY SPOTS," "TRAMPS IN THE TYROL," ETC.

LONDON: SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & CO.

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